

# THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

choice



## Indulge yourself!

Have a healthy conscience with our mixed nut and fair trade chocolate selections



## Charges that bite

Our tips – and yours – on how to avoid nasty credit card surcharges

## Lab tests

eBook readers  
Barbecues  
Media players  
Camcorders  
Compact cameras  
Car GPS  
Fridges

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## Cracking ideas

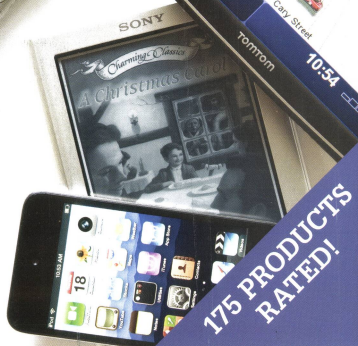
Our top buys for the festive season

### PLUS

Charity Christmas cards: how much are you really donating?

Your most sustainable shopping bag choices

Scoring a bargain on group-buying websites



175 PRODUCTS  
RATED!

teak: why you don't have to spend big to guarantee quality

## COMMENT

# A bone we won't let go of

**CHOICE won't stop until we achieve the same wins for better banking as we have against excessive bank charges and credit card rip-offs**



**W**hat a difference a month makes! In the last issue of *CHOICE*, we told you about our new Better Banking campaign, aimed at winning a more competitive market that works better for consumers. This month, we can already report some great progress.

Our campaign launch was a high-profile affair, featuring "watchdogs" delivering our campaign demands to bank CEOs – all within the same 24 hours that the Commonwealth Bank put interest rates up to a higher level than the Reserve Bank's official cash rate rise and Westpac announced an 84% increase in profits. This was the start of a new initiative to take the voice of consumers to the decision-makers and ensure your concerns and priorities on banking are heard loud and clear in the boardrooms of the Big Four banks, as well as in the corridors of power.

We've already had a real win, with the G20 countries agreeing at their recent summit in Seoul to look at global consumer protection in this area. The G20 leaders agreed to a new process, reporting back next year, for identifying ways to raise standards of consumer financial protection. This is something we had been pressing for and that Prime Minister Julia Gillard took up with other world leaders.

We have three simple campaign calls – for:

- Banks to make switching easier and prioritise better customer service;

- Government to stamp out unfair fees and increase competition; and
- Consumers to demand a better deal from their banks.

To support the campaign and to tell us about your own bank experiences, log on to [www.choice.com.au/betterbanking](http://www.choice.com.au/betterbanking), where you'll also be able to sign up for regular updates. Or, you can join one of our public events around the country in the coming months, where you can talk to me and other CHOICE staff and have your say on banking reform. Turn to page 12 for more details.

As your watchdog, our push for a better banking deal for you is one bone we won't let go of. We'll keep holding on until we achieve the same success as we've had with our drives to combat excessive bank charges and credit card rip-offs.

### Season's greetings

As we near the end of our 50th anniversary year, I'd like to take the opportunity to wish you and your families all the very best for this festive season and thank you for your support. I hope you enjoy the eight extra product test pages in this issue, with a strong focus on Christmas gift ideas to treat your loved ones – or just yourself!

**Nick Stace, CEO**  
Phone 1800 266 786

PS – If you live in or are visiting Sydney over the coming months, treat yourself to a trip to the Powerhouse Museum, where you can see a display marking CHOICE's 50th anniversary. Find out more on page 4.

## CHOICE. The people's watchdog.

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry.

We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, to [www.choice.com.au](http://www.choice.com.au) and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers.

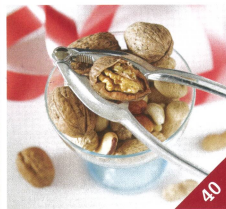
CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

**SUBSCRIBE CHOICE Plus** personal: \$33 per quarter for magazine and full online access; **CHOICE** personal subscription: one year \$86, two years \$154.80; Company/institution: one year \$172, two years \$309.60.

**ONLINE membership** \$22.95 per quarter. **CHOICE COMPUTER** personal subscription: One year \$50, two years \$90; Company/institution: one year \$100, two years \$180. Surcharges apply to overseas shipments.

**SUBSCRIPTION AND RENEWAL** Call 1800 069 552 or email us at [ausconsumer@choice.com.au](mailto:ausconsumer@choice.com.au). **CHOICE EXTRA** Magazine subscribers can request back copies of articles at [www.choiceextra.com.au](http://www.choiceextra.com.au).





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## NUMBER CRUNCH

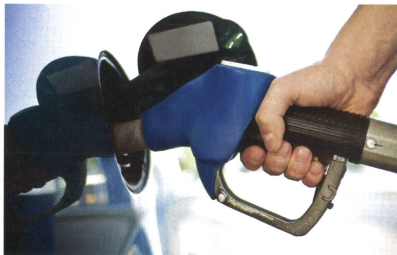
### US\$6.54

The estimated assembly cost of an Apple iPhone 4.

### AUD\$859

The iPhone 4 retail price in Australia.

Source: Teardown Analyses, iSuppli Corp.



## + SUSTAINABILITY

**DARK CLOUDS OVER SUNSHINE STATE** When CHOICE reported on biofuels for your car, specifically ethanol (see *CHOICE*, November 2010, page 18), Queensland was set to phase out unleaded petrol by the end of the year. At the last minute, this has been suspended.

The Queensland government has been actively promoting ethanol-blended E10 biofuel for several years due to its environmental benefits and also to support local growers and industry. Treasurer Andrew Fraser cited the clawback of the fuel excise rebate for ethanol as the reason for the government's decision to delay.

Ethanol attracts a full rebate on the 38c fuel excise until 30 June 2011. After this date, under proposed federal government arrangements the rebate will be reduced on a sliding scale until the full excise is applied by 2020. UTA MIHM

## + CHOICE DISPLAY

### Showcasing our work

Take a trip down memory lane with us as we celebrate 50 years of CHOICE.

Visitors to Sydney's Powerhouse Museum can step back in time and see some of the intriguing – and downright dangerous – consumer devices that have been vigorously tested in the CHOICE labs over the past 50 years.

The *Consumer Power: 50 Years of CHOICE* display, which runs from December to 15 May 2011, celebrates our role in improving product standards and safety as well as our achievements for consumers. Items on display include a lethal crossbow designed as a children's toy, as well as the now-infamous Bowin "flamethrower" heater, the hose of which we discovered could detach and spew

flames. In 1996, the manufacturer unsuccessfully took CHOICE to the Federal Court, claiming defamation; the landmark case, *Bowin Designs v Australian Consumers' Association*, is now taught in law schools and gave CHOICE greater powers to act on behalf of consumers. Examples of food packaging are also on display to showcase our campaign for better food labelling.

"We feel very proud to be showcased by this great institution, and look forward to introducing our work to thousands of visitors over the next few months," says CHOICE Chief Executive Officer, Nick Stace.

TANYA FONG

## + LABOUR

### Worms in the Apple

The IT/comms giant under fire for poor labour practices.

Apple has been criticised for poor working conditions in the Chinese factories that make its computers and iPhones.

The factories, which also make components for Dell and HP, have been accused of submitting workers to long hours under high pressure for poor wages, as well as oppressively high security and a militaristic management style.

A string of suicides among employees prompted one factory to organise a huge rally to boost morale, with 20,000 workers waving pompoms and shouting slogans about the value of life and family. The company also raised wages, hired counsellors and installed safety nets on buildings to catch would-be jumpers, and is aiming to reduce overtime from 80 hours a month to the government-mandated 36.

At another factory, two women using a chemical solvent, n-hexane, to glue and polish the logos on Apple products have been hospitalised for more than six months. After breathing in the chemical's vapours, they became dizzy and numb and eventually could not walk. The resulting pain and weakness in hands, arms and legs are long-lasting.

Wintek, a company supplying touchscreens for mobile phones, has also had employees treated for n-hexane poisoning, one of whom died from exposure to the chemical.

KARINA BRAY



## + SUSTAINABILITY

**Dim days for solar power?**

Solar power could be left in the shade as the NSW government cuts payments to domestic producers.

**F**eed-in tariffs – cash payments to households producing solar power fed back into the grid – have been slashed to a third of their previous rate by the NSW government.

In its bid to halt rising electricity costs, the 60c per kWh gross feed-in tariff paid to existing producers has been reduced to 20c/kWh for those installing a new solar system.

The clean energy industry body, Clean Energy Council, has reacted angrily, claiming “the government has pulled the rug out from under the NSW solar industry.” However, the Keneally government has heralded the scheme as a success, claiming the scheduled review sought to balance electricity costs for consumers while still supporting renewable energy generation.

The Australian Technology Association (ATA) was not supportive of the scheme, saying it was poorly designed and implemented. However, the ATA also predicted electricity price rises and cited the falling costs of going solar, which will continue to make it an attractive proposition for both NSW residents and households across the country.

CHOICE has calculated state-by-state payback times for solar panel systems (see *CHOICE*, August 2010, page 23). To keep pace with the changes, we’ll update these calculations in an upcoming issue.

BRENDAN MAYS

## + SAFETY

**Skilled scootering**

Driving a mobility scooter requires a range of skills, so get a health check-up first and follow these tips.

**E**very year, about 500 people – mostly in their 70s, 80s or 90s – suffer head injuries and fractures due to an accident with their mobility scooter. More worryingly, 71 Australians have died from mobility scooter accidents since 2000. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has launched an awareness campaign about safe scooter driving in a bid to reduce these casualties.

Driving a scooter requires very good hearing, sight, strength, coordination, balance and concentration, so the ACCC recommends getting a check-up before you start. If you lack these abilities or need to take medication that makes you drowsy, a mobility scooter may not be a safe option. It’s also important to choose the right type of scooter. Three-wheeled models are only safe indoors, as they can be unstable and even topple over on rough surfaces. Outdoors, use a four-wheeled scooter,

which can weigh up to 110kg and is much sturdier.

The following tips are recommended:

- **Get some training** Check with suppliers and your local council for training options.
- **Drive on footpaths**, in shopping centres and parks wherever possible – use roads only as a last resort.
- **Stick close to the kerb** if you have to drive on the road. Face oncoming traffic and be extra cautious.
- **Install a flag, lights and reflectors** and wear bright clothes.
- **Drive no faster than 10km/h**, and at lower speeds in rough and crowded conditions.
- **Only cross roads at lights** or pedestrian crossings.
- **Keep your load down** Limit your parcels and never carry anyone else.

For more information, including a free booklet, contact the ACCC on 1300 302 502. **UTAMHIM**



## + CONSUMER SERVICE

**RECEIPT CENTRAL** Do you find it difficult to keep track of all your receipts? Niggle It ([www.niggleit.com](http://www.niggleit.com)) is an online service (also accessible via an iPhone and SmartPhone app with photo-capture functions) that can store all your receipts and warranties. It also sends you regular reminders on expiring warranties, as well as telco and utilities contracts. Free for the first five documents, Niggle It offers a \$24.95/year plan that allows you to store 70 documents with a 300MB data limit, while its \$29.95/month plan comes with a reporting listing all the items you’ve indicated you wish to claim as tax deductions. **TANYA FONG**

The NSW government has slashed payments to domestic solar power producers from 60c per kWh to 20c/kWh

**CAN YOU HELP?**

Have you seen or heard companies making bold green claims – such as “becoming carbon-neutral” – or promoting a sustainable, clean-and-green image? If you believe any of those claims are questionable, please let us know about them – email us at [greenwash@choice.com.au](mailto:greenwash@choice.com.au)

More credit cards means paying more annual fees, and potentially creating more debt that could become unmanageable. Consider how many cards you really need and keep them to a minimum.

## NAB LEADS - AGAIN

With balance transfers, debt attracting the highest interest is usually paid off last. For example, if you transfer \$3000 at 0% for six months and then make a \$250 cash advance, you'll pay off the balance transfer first while the advance sits earning a higher rate of interest. From January 2011, NAB customers can pay off the most costly debt first. CHOICE wants other financial institutions to follow suit.

## + CREDIT CARDS

### Tricky transfers

Don't let the lure of low-rate credit card balance transfers cloud the bigger picture.

Transferring your credit card debt to a card with a low interest-rate introductory offer can be an attractive proposition. But don't just jump at the first 0% interest rate offer you see or you could fall into some common traps.

Low introductory rates may eventually revert to a high cash rate of 20%-22% until the debt is paid off, so think long-term and assess the total cost of a balance transfer. A very low interest rate for six months may seem too good to refuse, but if you're transferring \$3000-\$5000 and making monthly repayments of \$200 or less, you probably won't pay off your debt during the introductory period.

If your original card was charging between 12%-15% on that same balance, there is usually little difference between the original and new card in terms of interest paid and the amount of time taken to pay off the card (see table, below). In fact, once you factor in any

transfer fees, annual fees and any other expenditures on either card, a balance transfer can actually cost you money.

For those with larger debts or paying interest above 15%, the savings you can access from a balance transfer will be higher, especially if you can access a longer low-introductory period or increase your repayments. However, the same rules still apply - find out the full cost of a balance transfer, only switch to an overall good-value card and check the revert rates.

#### Keeper cards

Not all credit cards offering a low-rate balance transfer revert to the high cash advance rate; unpaid debt reverts to the purchase rate for the following cards. All rates and transfer offers are subject to change, so check the fine print.

- **St George Vertigo card** 2.99% balance transfers for six months; reverts to a purchase rate of 12.49%.

- **BankWest Lite card** Intro rate: 5.99% on purchases and balance transfers for 12 months. Remaining debt reverts to a purchase rate of 10.75%.
- **NAB Low Rate card** 4.99% balance transfers for six months, and any remaining balances will revert to the purchase rate of 13.24% from 14 January 2011. The card utilises NAB's fairer repayment structure.

BRENDAN MAYS

### TRANSFER TIPS

- **Balance transfer to an overall good value card that reverts to a low purchase rate if you're looking to reduce significant credit card debt.**
- **Don't hop between credit cards.** Too many card applications may hurt your credit rating, which companies use as a tool to assess your financial viability. And there's no guarantee new card applications will be approved.
- **Pay off your debt as soon as possible, and don't spend on any credit cards until your balance transfer is paid in full.** Consider using a Visa Debit or Debit MasterCard while paying off your credit card.
- **Keep the number of cards to a minimum.** More cards equals more annual fees, and more potential debt that could become unmanageable. Consider how many credit cards you really need.

THE REAL COSTS OF INTRODUCTORY LOW-RATE CREDIT CARDS

| Credit card balance (\$) | Monthly repayment (\$) | Interest rate (%)                              | Total cost (\$, inc. interest and fees) | Time taken to repay (years) |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 3000                     | 200                    | 0 (reverts to 21% cash rate after six months)  | 374                                     | 1.3                         |
| 3000                     | 200                    | 13.4                                           | 500                                     | 1.4                         |
| 5000                     | 200                    | 0 (reverts to 21% cash rate after six months)  | 1157                                    | 2.5                         |
| 5000                     | 200                    | 2.9 (reverts to 21% cash rate after 12 months) | 824                                     | 2.3                         |
| 5000                     | 200                    | 13.4                                           | 1193                                    | 2.5                         |

USING THE TABLE In our calculations, we assume each card has a \$99 annual fee, the same repayment is made each month and no other fees occur. According to the RBA, as of September 2010, the average rate for low-interest cards was 13.4%. Factor in annual fee differences when doing your own calculations.

## + INSTANT DIGITAL CAMERA

## Faded glory

Printed images in an instant were once the pride of Polaroid, but in this digital age, there are better ways to achieve the same result.

Since the late 1940s, the name Polaroid has been associated with instant film photo prints. Then along came the digital camera; now instant checking is an expectation rather than the exception and the process is virtually cost-free. So why produce a digital camera with a built-in printer? The most obvious answer is that a hard copy print is a nice thing to produce for friends or colleagues on the spot.

Polaroid has produced two products designed to address this need. The Polaroid TWO is a five-megapixel digital camera with an inbuilt dye sublimation printer, while the Polaroid PoGo is just a printer. You can connect the latter via USB or Bluetooth to just about anything with a print function.

Both of these products are battery-operated and therefore very mobile. Unfortunately, neither is as useful as the Polaroid cameras of the past. The first problem is the paper

size (5cm x 7.6cm), which is a little smaller than the average business card and a relatively expensive printing proposition at about 66c per page. Secondly, the print quality on both is poor at best, with inaccurate colours and streaks in areas of solid colour, such as a sky. However, they do have a sticky backing and so might be handy for school assignments and the like.

The camera has a digital [4X] zoom, but its image quality is poor – even on-screen and at the camera's best-quality setting – and the digital crop just makes it worse. Its [6cm x 4.5cm] monitor is dull and difficult to see in bright conditions, though the menu is reasonably intuitive. There's no indication that the camera is in focus and it's slow to respond to the shutter button or changes in ambient light. Video quality [640 x 480, 30fps] is very poor, but the camera can be used as a webcam. It's heavy [325g including battery and paper] and bulky [118 x 76 x 36.5mm] for a compact camera, largely because of the inbuilt printer.

The Polaroid PoGo printer is lighter than the camera [228g, including battery and paper] and

## POLAROID TWO INSTANT DIGITAL CAMERA/ POGO PRINTER

Price Polaroid TWO: \$270

Polaroid PoGo printer: \$130 [30

sheets of Zink photo paper: \$20]

Contact [www.polaroid.com.au](http://www.polaroid.com.au)



less expensive, but has little to recommend it other than its portability. It can connect to a mobile phone, which we managed to do without trouble. Printing takes about a minute, but the image is heavily cropped at the edges because the paper is a different format to most digital cameras [the Polaroid TWO included].

## CHOICE VERDICT

Since it's not difficult to share images from one mobile phone to another, and given the relative quality of most digital cameras in this price bracket, it's hard to see the value in either of these products. **CHRIS RUGGLES**

## COMING

Find out which **cordless phones** have the technology to turn your mobile phone into an extra landline handset for your home.

**Steam irons** can cost up to \$140, but we've found a Best Buy for about a third of that price.

And with water becoming an increasingly precious resource, we find out which **dishwashers** are using innovative technology to improve water efficiency without compromising their wash performance.



Sadly, neither of these products is as useful as the Polaroid instant print cameras of the past



The Nokia N8 is the first mobile CHOICE has tested to support both the Telstra NextG and Optus Yes G networks in a single handset



**+ MULTIMEDIA MOBILE PHONE**

## Great handset, same old OS

The Nokia N8 is a very good multimedia mobile, but it's not a smartphone.

**F**irst, the good news: the Nokia N8 is a powerfully featured multimedia touchscreen phone, with 16GB internal memory and support for a further 32GB using removable microSD cards. Connectivity includes WiFi support, so you can access the net using your home wireless network. The N8 is also the first mobile CHOICE has tested to support both the Telstra 850MHz NextG and Optus 900MHz Yes G networks in a single handset.

Video and still-photo capture are a joy. The N8 records video (720p) at the same quality as a HD pocket camcorder and captures digital photos at up to 12 megapixels, with a level of exposure and menu control you'd find in a good entry-level compact still camera. Switching between video and photo is easy, with basic in-camera editing allowing

you to post the photo or video to sites such as YouTube directly from the phone. The social networking functionality, integrating Facebook, Twitter and email into a central area, is delivered simply and effectively on a customisable home screen.

The HDMI connectivity is a great feature – simply plug a HDMI cable into the micro HDMI adapter (provided in the kit) and watch your video, photos or even PowerPoint presentation on a flat-panel TV. The N8 also has the unusual ability to copy and paste any media from the phone directly to a USB drive. Its music player works well, with simple controls and support for album cover art and all popular music formats. You can listen through headphones using the 3.5mm jack or wirelessly via Bluetooth 3.0 headphones. Holding the “home” button allows you to quickly toggle through the open applications, and the touchscreen’s tactile feedback and QWERTY keyboard make texting quick and effective.

Free worldwide car and hiking navigation maps for download (not just network-sucking Google Maps)

remain a big feature for the “Nseries” phones, and the additional tips from Lonely Planet are useful.

Anyone familiar with Nokia phones will have no trouble working through the new Symbian 3 OS, as it has a very similar look and feel to the previous OS. But there are new features, such as multi-touch selections and multiple application support.

Now the bad news. The main drawbacks of the Symbian 3 OS are its relatively poor application support and lack of enough customisation and power to satisfy high-end smartphone users. Nokia itself has admitted as much, claiming the N8 will be the first and last Nseries phone to use this operating system (future phones will use the more robust MeeGo OS).

### CHOICE VERDICT

There's a lot to like about this phone, but Nokia is doing the N8 a disservice by attempting to market it as an alternative to Android mobiles and Apple's iPhone 4. It's a very good multimedia phone, but it's not the smartphone Messiah. **DENIS GALLAGHER**

#### NOKIA N8

Price \$749

Contact [www.nokia.com.au](http://www.nokia.com.au)



+ **HANDHELD VAC****A must for dust**

This is the best-performing handheld vacuum cleaner CHOICE has ever tested.



Past testing of handheld vacuum cleaners has found plenty of good performers. Now, we've found the best of all (so far).

The Black and Decker Dustbuster Flexi has a short, flexible hose built in. You can unclip the hose from the handle and reach nooks and crannies that other handheld vacs cannot. It also includes a small motorised brush head

(separately battery-powered), a crevice tool, upholstery tool and dusting brush, plus an AC adapter for charging.

We put the Dustbuster Flexi through our handheld vac tests on hard and carpeted floors and car interiors; it excelled at all of them. The motor head helps, particularly with picking up pet hair. You'll get eight minutes of full power vacuuming on a full charge – not as long as many others, but long enough for most jobs, including efficiently cleaning a car's interior.

The Dustbuster Flexi is easy to use and quite compact. Its different cleaning heads can be clipped to the unit for convenient carrying. The charging adapter has two jacks, one for the main unit and one for the motor head. And emptying the unit's bin is

straightforward, though cleaning the filter can be a bit messy.

The only downside we found is its NiCd [nickel-cadmium] battery. These are generally being phased out in favour of more advanced technologies such as NiMH [nickel-metal hydride] and Li-ion [lithium ion]. Cadmium is a toxic heavy metal, dangerous in landfill, so NiCd batteries should not be disposed of in ordinary household garbage. The battery is replaceable, so when it eventually dies you'll only need to replace the battery, not the whole unit.

**CHOICE VERDICT**

The Dustbuster Flexi easily and effectively tackles spot vacuuming tasks. If you're in the market for a handheld vac, check it out. **CHRIS BARNES**

The only downside to the Dustbuster Flexi is its nickel-cadmium battery, which should not be disposed of in ordinary household garbage

**BLACK & DECKER  
DUSTBUSTER FLEXI  
PD1200-XE**

Price \$169

Contact [www.blackanddecker.com.au](http://www.blackanddecker.com.au)

+ **ALL-IN-ONE COOKING APPLIANCE****The ultimate kitchen aid**

This 10-function cooking appliance doesn't miss a beat.

Combining 10 functions in one unit, the Thermomix can chop, beat, mix, whip, grind, knead, mince, grate, juice, blend, heat, stir, steam and weigh food. After CHOICE tested the latest version, the TM31, our Home Economist, Fiona Mair, went so far as to say it's her new favourite appliance.

Included with the unit is a mixing bowl and lid, simmering basket, stirring attachment, measuring cup, spatula and Varoma [steaming bowl], as well as a recipe book. The heating element is incorporated into the bottom of the mixing bowl rather than inside the main unit, and the lid has provisions for spillages should a mixture boil over while cooking. It has a magnetic motor, said to increase the longevity of

the product as it has no moving parts or belts to wear out over time. Its scale increases in increments of 5g and you can reset to zero at any time to weigh newly added ingredients. The unit will not operate unless the lid is locked into position, and if it hasn't been used for 15 minutes it automatically switches to standby mode, which draws less power.

While the unit has many controls, which can seem daunting at first, they're well labelled. Minimal parts mean it's easy to assemble and disassemble, and cleaning is also a breeze. All parts are dishwasher-safe and the main unit is easy to wipe over. Its plastic parts may stain with some food colours, though bicarbonate soda should remove any stains.

**CHOICE VERDICT**

The Thermomix is built to last; we would give it five stars except for its hefty price tag (although staggered payment options are available). It's great for a busy family or less experienced cook. It also saves time, as you can set the timer and be free to get on with other tasks, and allows for healthier cooking through its strong emphasis on using fresh ingredients.

REBECCA GATTO

**THERMOMIX TM31**

Price \$1939

Contact [www.thermomix.com.au](http://www.thermomix.com.au)



**NOT  
AVAILABLE  
IN STORES...**

The Thermomix is only available through in-home demonstrations, so you'll have a chance to familiarise yourself with the unit before you buy.

# YOUR SAY

Your experiences help our research and often inform other readers about scams and rip-offs. Positive responses you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too, so please email [ausconsumer@choice.com.au](mailto:ausconsumer@choice.com.au) or mail to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.



## An unrewarding feeling

With a wedding to attend in Forster, NSW, my husband and I decided to fly from Melbourne to Newcastle and hire a car at the airport. We had enough Commonwealth Bank Awards points for two days' car hire with Thrifty Car Rental for a Hyundai Getz, so I rang the bank to find out what the procedure was. I was told to ring Thrifty directly and tell them I would be using the award points; then, when I received the subsequent vouchers, I was to ring Thrifty back and give them the voucher numbers.

I made the booking with Thrifty and told them I wanted four days' car hire. I would use the voucher for two of them, then upgrade to a Corolla Ascent for the other two and pay the difference. I was quoted a price of \$137.54 to pay after using the vouchers. Three weeks later I received the vouchers and rang Thrifty to give them the numbers, only to find the price had jumped to \$195!

I checked their website; the price listed there was less than the \$195 I was now being quoted. On querying this I was told it was 30% cheaper to book online. But here's the catch: Commonwealth Bank Awards customers can't book online – they must book by phone and are quoted a higher price. I would have been better off not worrying about the vouchers and booking online.

I lodged a complaint with Thrifty and the Commonwealth Bank and received a response from both companies as well as a voucher of \$25 to spend on my next Thrifty car rental; however, I doubt I will be using them again. The CBA advised that my best solution would be to redeem my points for a travel voucher and use that to book my car rental next time.

Simone Dalton, Warragul, Vic

**CHOICE SAYS:** Simone received the following (edited) response from a Thrifty representative: "You were unfortunately misinformed by the staff member about the 30% price variation when booking online versus booking through our contact centre. We do offer a slight discount (\$5 per day) for customers booking online who are not tied to any corporate rates or tailored promotions and set offers such as True Rewards/CBA redemption vouchers, which works in a very different manner from membership programs such as Qantas Frequent Flyer, where members can only earn points with Thrifty rather than redeeming vouchers for car hire.

"Further, we do not currently have an online functionality for CBA credit card holders wanting to redeem their points for car hire vouchers, so this option should not have been provided as it was not applicable to your requirement."

Rewards credit cards come with various tricks and traps, and some of these depend on the reward you choose. Vouchers usually have expiry dates, and there can be other restrictions to their use. Make sure you research the rewards you choose so that you get the best value and avoid unexpected charges. For more on travel rewards credit cards, see *CHOICE*, October 2010, page 18.

## THUMBS UP!

**Graham Deck** of Salter Point, WA, was pleasantly surprised when EMP Industrials Australasia replaced a damaged chair mat he had just bought from them. He tells CHOICE that "anyone who says you can't get good customer service these days has not done business with EMP!"

**Trevor Lowe** of Caloundra, Qld, is impressed with Dick Smith's customer service. He contacted them for a warranties booklet and was told one would be sent out straight away – and he did receive it not long after.

## Open invitation to theft?

Earlier this year I contacted the Commonwealth Bank (CBA) about a product called PayPass, or "Tap N Go" – a contactless payment system that attaches to all their MasterCard credit and debit cards. The idea behind this technology is that you don't need to sign or enter your PIN when making a purchase – simply wave your card in front of a reader and the transaction is complete. There is no physical contact between your card and the reader – in fact, you don't even need to take the card out of your wallet. From the CBA I learned the following:

- The transaction limit is \$100 per transaction.
- There is no limit to the number of transactions you can make.



- You cannot set a limit.
- You cannot opt out of the system.

I consequently raised several security concerns with the bank, none of which has so far been addressed.

I'm concerned that I cannot opt out or limit my exposure to this technology – I didn't ask for it and I don't want it.

There is no protection against skimming my card, and once it becomes known there is no limit to the number of transactions you can make, there will be an incentive to physically steal my card, which potentially exposes me to a higher risk of physical violence. Does the bank protect against that?

**Onno Benschop,  
Bayswater, WA**

**CHOICE SAYS:** According to the CBA, "Tap N Go is as safe as any other credit or debit transaction. Like any credit card transaction, the CBA will reimburse customers if they find their card has been stolen and used without permission. The cards also have encrypted EMV chips and unlike a magnetic stripe cannot be skimmed, as the card is presented to the reader rather than swiped or inserted."

"The low-dollar limit means the contactless system is only being installed in places with low transaction values (such as convenience stores, newsagents and fast-food providers). For someone to steal cards and risk going to jail, they are unlikely to be attracted to steal a number of small

items and are much more likely to target large ticket items.

"It is much more difficult to lose a contactless card since it never leaves your hand when you use it, so you can't accidentally leave it behind. This is a well-used technology in some overseas markets and their experience is that it does not create increased risks for cardholders."

"CBA Debit MasterCard holders can switch their account to a CBA keycard without the PayPass feature."

If your financial institution changes a product in a way that no longer suits your needs, use this as an opportunity to shop around. See our story on balance transfer credit cards on page 6.

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### Spreading the seeds of doubt

**Y**our story on palm oil (see *Palmed Off*, *CHOICE*, August 2010, page 12) quotes the Heart Foundation as recommending avoiding palm oil.

I recently noticed that my regular margarine, Unilever's Flora Pro-activ, lists vegetable oils in its ingredients list, without giving a breakdown of which oils are used. I contacted Unilever to find out if palm oil is an ingredient and, if so, what proportion of the vegetable oils the palm oil constitutes. Their answer was 14%.

Since the Heart Foundation has its Tick on Pro-activ tubs, I emailed the NHF asking how they could justify their Tick, given its palm oil content. At the time of writing, I have not received a reply.

**Harold Levien,  
Dover Heights, NSW**

**CHOICE SAYS:** We asked the Heart Foundation to comment. Because palm oil is 51% saturated fat, the Heart Foundation were concerned about large quantities of palm oil being

used in commercial deep-frying and baking. They suggested that margarine spreads may contain smaller amounts of palm oil for technical reasons.

They also told us: "All oils have varying amounts of healthy and unhealthy types of fat as part of their make-up – it's the ratio of healthy to unhealthy that determines whether an oil is healthy or not."

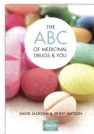
"Margarine spreads are made from liquid oils such as canola, sunflower and olive. To make the margarine semi-solid and therefore spreadable, a hard fat is added – in this case, a small amount of palm oil to make it spreadable, but not enough to make the overall margarine unhealthy."

"A sunflower-based margarine spread typically has about 17% saturated fat content; for comparison, butter has about 53%. Flora Pro-activ (Original) margarine spread contains approximately 9% palm oil in the final product and is a healthier

choice because of its comparatively lower levels of saturated fat."

When choosing a spread, it's important to read the nutrition information panel to compare total fat, saturated fat and sodium content per 100g. And remember, some brands that don't carry the Tick may be just as healthy as those that do – it's just that the manufacturer hasn't applied for the Tick (see *Seal of Approval?*, *CHOICE* March 2010, page 14).

Unfortunately, if you want to avoid palm oil for sustainability reasons, you have no way of knowing which spreads contain palm oil and which don't unless manufacturers are compelled to specify the source of "vegetable oil" – something *CHOICE* is calling for.



**LETTER OF THE MONTH** Harold receives *The ABC of Medicinal Drugs & You*, or any other book of his choice at [www.choice.com.au/books](http://www.choice.com.au/books). Unfortunately we are unable to answer all the emails and letters we receive. We may edit or print only an extract of emails and letters.

# ONLINE THIS MONTH

'Tis the season for shopping – both in the lead-up to Christmas and then through the frenzy of the new year sales. So make sure you check out our online shopping guide ([www.choice.com.au/christmas](http://www.choice.com.au/christmas)) for a complete round-up of useful pointers and astute buys (see page 20 for some of the festive Best Buys). Meanwhile, our new Better Banking campaign sparked some of the most impassioned debate we've seen in a long while.



## Better Banking campaign

[www.choice.com.au/betterbanking](http://www.choice.com.au/betterbanking)

Consumer anger against the banks – helped along by the latest hike in interest rates – found a ready outlet online, as our campaigns team launched its latest offensive against the blatant lack of banking competition. To have your voice heard, sign up to our campaign at the link above. Check out photos of the CHOICE watchdogs at our media launch, as well as related podcasts and videos. Here's what some of you had to say.

**Roger Hooper:** Thank you for standing up on this issue. No business would ever in its right mind enter into a contract where one party has the right to change any condition they want without any possible recourse for the other party, yet Australian home owners are treated like dogs to be kicked and walked over when it comes to our rights as borrowers.

**Tony Martin:** 21 years ago I joined a company that had a staff credit union. I immediately ditched the banks and gave them a go. Although the credit union hasn't always led with new products and services, they haven't been far behind. Four mortgages and many

dollars saved later, every time the banks make the news it leaves me feeling satisfied. If you're looking for respect, a fair go and competitive banking products, there are alternatives out there.

**Mal3:** This looks like a business opportunity – provide a service that transfers all accounts, direct debits and mortgages from one bank to another, or to a credit union, for a fee of say \$100. Surely a loan consolidation company could do this largely within their existing skill set?



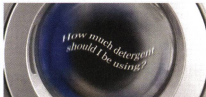
MEDIA SPOKESPERSON CHRISTOPHER ZINN (RIGHT) AND THE CHOICE "WATCHDOGS"

## CHOICE videos

We've added a number of new videos in response to member requests for more information, on both perennial favourites and fast-moving technology such as DVRs, digital TV and home theatre.

1. Five things you didn't know about your washing machine:

[www.choice.com.au/washingmachines](http://www.choice.com.au/washingmachines)



2. What is a DVR?

[www.choice.com.au/DVR](http://www.choice.com.au/DVR)



3. Digital TV switch – what you need to know

[www.choice.com.au/digital](http://www.choice.com.au/digital)



4. Home theatre audio – part 1 and 2

[www.choice.com.au/hometheatre](http://www.choice.com.au/hometheatre)







## + CONSUMER LAW

### Strength in unity

New laws coming into effect give Australians the same consumer rights regardless of which state they live in.

On 1 January 2011, the final set of amendments to the new Australian Consumer Law (ACL) comes into force. As CHOICE has commented before, these amendments are the most important reforms to Australia's consumer laws since the Trade Practices Act was passed in 1974.

The most important elements of the package are:

- New laws on unfair terms in standard form contracts;
  - Improved consumer guarantees on goods and services;
  - Controls on door-to-door sales and similar sales away from business premises;
  - New product safety rules requiring suppliers to inform regulators when they find out about a safety issue with their products; and
  - New enforcement powers for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), including powers to issue warning and infringement notices, seek civil penalties and recover damages for groups of consumers.
- More importantly, the new laws apply nationally, so for the first time Australians everywhere will have the same consumer rights.

CHOICE has campaigned over decades for many of these changes and we continue to represent consumer interests by making sure the implementation of the new rules enhances your awareness and understanding of your rights.

Ultimately, consumer laws work best when consumers are armed with information about the rights that they can assert when a problem arises. "With consumer guarantees in particular, if consumers cannot get a satisfactory outcome from the retailer, the time and cost of taking the matter any further means that in practice, they are denied their rights to goods of 'acceptable quality'", says Christopher Zinn, CHOICE Director of Campaigns and Communications. "What we need to see is the ACCC taking some test cases early to establish the law and get the information out to consumers."

It's also a situation where consumers can make a valuable contribution just by insisting on their rights. Even if you only do it for a few months, we would urge you to review your contracts – preferably before you sign – and report any unfair terms to us or the ACCC."

Similarly, you can help improve products by taking action to enforce consumer guarantees. If your toaster breaks down a few months after you've bought it, don't just throw it out and buy a new one – take it back and insist on a replacement, refund or repair. You'll not only be helping yourself, but also supporting all consumers and their right to a fair deal.

You can also help consumers by getting involved in our upcoming CHOICE Awards – in particular, our quest to find the Consumer Champion of the Year. See CHOICE Online, right, for more. **DAVID HOWARTH**

Consumer laws work best when consumers are armed with information about the rights that they can assert when a problem arises



### CHOICE ONLINE

The second annual CHOICE Awards are just around the corner and we need your help finding a Consumer Champion of the Year. Is there someone in your community who has made a difference to the lives of consumers? This can be at a local or national level. To find out more or to nominate someone, go to [www.choice.com.au/consumer-champion](http://www.choice.com.au/consumer-champion).

## NUTSHELL

>> We invited 30 CHOICE staff members and three experts to taste 11 fair trade and organic chocolate blocks.  
>> There are a few good-conscience brands that, according to our experts, taste good too.

STORY EMILY MCCLUSKEY

# Chocolate with a conscience

As fair trade and organic chocolate rises in popularity, chocoholics can indulge themselves with a clear conscience. CHOICE tracks down the ethical and sustainable blocks that taste good as well.

**W**hile chocolate has long been hailed as a decadent treat, its history and environmental impact is far from sweet. But with a growing number of organic and fair trade products on the market, chocoholics can now indulge themselves in good conscience (the waistline's another matter). Our staff and expert tasting panel (see Meet the Experts, opposite) set out to find the most delicious fair trade and organic chocolates.

## The darker side of chocolate

Cocoa production is fraught with both human rights and environmental controversy, most notably:

**Deforestation** Cocoa farming is estimated to be responsible for the loss of millions of hectares of tropical rainforest. In Ghana and the Côte d'Ivoire, only small patches of original forest still stand in the wake of cocoa farming. The average cocoa plantation is productive for about 25 years, then more land is cleared to make way for the next. Unless sustainable farming practices are implemented, our current demand for cocoa means continuing deforestation.

**Pollutants** Cocoa farmers use agricultural chemicals to limit losses from disease and pests, which can run off into the surrounding environment. While the final product may only have trace residues, producers are at risk; with most farms located in the developing world, safety precautions are not always taken or enforced, leaving farmers vulnerable to high levels of these chemicals.

**Poverty** More than 30 developing countries grow cocoa, produced mainly by farms that are family-owned and run, with cocoa their sole source of income. Many of those small farmers have no access to the market and are unaware how much their crop is worth; they're often paid lower than the market price by middlemen.

There is a long chain from bean to bar, so farmers only receive a small piece of the pie.

**Child labour** The sad reality is that the chocolate treat in your child's lunchbox may be produced using child labour. In some countries it is accepted cultural practice for children to work on the farm as a transition into the family business. But some of these children are exposed to dangerous farming practices: they administer agricultural chemicals without protective clothing and work long hours, keeping them from school. Trafficking children to work on other farms is not uncommon.

## The fair trade and organic movements

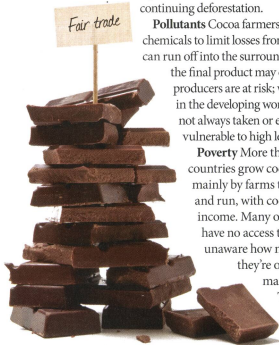
Between 2008 and 2009, retail sales of Fairtrade-certified products in Australia and New Zealand increased by 58%, while the number of buyers of organic products doubled in the five years up to 2008. More products have both Fairtrade and organic certification, meaning you can be doubly sure your chocolate is ethically tasty.

## Fair trade chocolate

The fair trade movement was started in the 1950s by not-for-profit importers wanting to alleviate poverty and improve the livelihoods of struggling producers. Over the years, alternative trade organisations began popping up all over the world. Twenty-four organisations worldwide now form Fairtrade Labelling Organisation International (FLO), which sets fair trade standards and coordinates the movement. Fairtrade guarantees a fair price for farmers (the Fairtrade Price), protecting them from world market fluctuation. They also receive an additional sum (the Fairtrade Premium) for investment in their business and community. The standards also prohibit child labour. The Fairtrade Association says this system benefits farmers and producers through:

- A fair and stable price for their produce.
- Security of long-term contracts.
- Investment in local community development.
- Improved working conditions.
- Environmentally-sustainable farming methods.
- Support in gaining the knowledge and skills needed to operate successfully in the global economy.

The Fairtrade symbol on a label means a product's ingredients have been obtained in line with Fairtrade policies, and the manufacturer and product, from bean



to bar, are independently audited to ensure the policies are followed. However, our analysis of endorsement schemes (see *CHOICE*, March 2010) found that Fairtrade certification falls short on one aspect – it is generally given to “producer organisations” rather than individual farmers. These organisations can be comprised of hundreds or sometimes thousands of farmers, meaning a “group certification” model is followed. For verification, a random check of a representative sample of individual farmers is conducted, meaning some farms may never be visited – an unavoidable reality, as it is implausible for Fairtrade to inspect every single farm each year. The system also favours small producers, so manufacturers are limited to a specific group of producers if they want to be Fairtrade-certified.

### Organic chocolate

Organic cocoa beans are produced using farming practices that work in harmony with the local ecosystem to ensure sustainability. This results in a farm that can continually produce crops without depleting the soil of nutrients – meaning no more forest-clearing. Organic farming also emphasises renewable resources and conservation of energy and water. No synthetic chemicals are used, so minimal residue is left in the finished >

### MEET THE EXPERTS

- **Mathew and David Gee** run a chocolate appreciation workshop at Barista Basics Coffee academy in Sydney.
- **Fiona Mair** is *CHOICE*'s home economist; she has extensive experience in food and beverage judging.



### HOW WE TRIAL

Thirty *CHOICE* staff members assess 11 different chocolates – five milk and six dark. The dark chocolate on trial ranges from 46% cocoa content to 72%. Brand names are disguised as much as possible without marring the appearance of the chocolate. The lay panel scores the chocolate on a scale from 1-5 – 1 being “like a lot” and 5 being “dislike a lot” – and comments on why they give the rating. Our expert panel provides an overall score out of 10, taking into consideration appearance, aroma, texture and taste.

### WHAT TO BUY

BEST  
BUY



**DARK CHOCOLATE FOR THE MILK CHOCOLATE LOWER**

Alter Eco Dark Chocolate  
Velvet Touch of Organic  
Milk (100g)  
**PRICE \$3.20**



**FOR YOUR DARK SIDE**  
Green & Black's  
Organic Dark Chocolate  
70% Cocoa (100g)  
**PRICE \$3.99**

BEST  
BUY



**BEST VALUE FOR MONEY**  
Just Organic (Aldi)  
Fairtrade Organic  
Milk Chocolate (100g)  
**PRICE \$1.99**



**FOR FANS OF EXTRA SWEET AND CREAMY**  
Cadbury Dairy Milk  
Milk Chocolate (200g)  
**PRICE \$4.29**



**CHOICE  
ONLINE**

For more information, including our experts' tasting notes, log on to [www.choice.com.au/ftchocolate](http://www.choice.com.au/ftchocolate).

**Fairtrade certification does not guarantee that the ingredients are produced using organic farming methods**

< product and workers are not exposed to high levels of synthetic pesticides or agricultural chemicals.

Certifying bodies in various countries set standards that must be adhered to in order to carry a certification logo; certified companies are audited to ensure compliance with the standards. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service established a national organisational standard, and seven Australian organisations are accredited to certify products. In our investigation of endorsement schemes, we highly recommended the Australian Certified Organic (ACO) and NASAA Certified Organic (NCO) organisations for their conduct, standards and transparency. Imports certified under a foreign system must also meet Australia's National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce and have documentation to support this.

### Is all organic chocolate fair trade (and vice versa)?

The short answer is no. Environmentally sustainable farming practices are fundamental to both organic and Fairtrade certification, so while there is an overlap, there are distinct differences between the two.

Fairtrade certification does not guarantee that the ingredients are produced under organic farming methods. You can be sure the cocoa and 95% of its other ingredients are organic if a chocolate is "organic certified", but the ingredients may not have been produced and traded under fair trade standards. However, most of the products CHOICE looked at were certified as both Fairtrade and organic – and the organic ones that weren't Fairtrade-certified have fair trade policies.

"We fully support the basic principles behind fair trade," says Monika Noack, public relations representative for Vivani, a chocolate company that is organic but not Fairtrade-certified. "That said, we think the opportunity to market organic cocoa at reasonable prices should not be restricted solely to small producers but include those of other sizes. We'll continue to trade primarily with small-farmer cooperatives, but we're unwilling to restrict ourselves in the choice of raw material producers simply on the criteria of size."

To be sure your chocolate has been produced ethically, look for the Fairtrade certification symbol, which means it has been independently audited. ■

#### DARK CHOCOLATE

| Brand/product (in order of experts' score)                   | Experts' score (out of 10) | Staff ranking | Ethical trade policies only | Fairtrade certified | Organic certified | Weight (g) | Cocoa (%) | Price per 100g (\$) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|---------------------|
| <b>Alter Eco</b> Dark Chocolate Velvet Touch of Organic Milk | 7.3                        | 1             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 46        | 3.20                |
| <b>Green &amp; Black's</b> Organic Dark Chocolate            | 7.3                        | 2             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 70        | 3.99                |
| <b>Vivani</b> Organic Dark                                   | 6.3                        | 4             | ✓                           |                     | ✓                 | 100        | 72        | 5.20                |
| <b>Cocolo</b> Dark Premium Organic Fairtrade Chocolate       | 5                          | 3             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 70        | 5.50                |
| <b>Plamil</b> Organic Chocolate                              | 4.5                        | 5             | ✓                           |                     | ✓                 | 100        | 60        | 6.80                |
| <b>Loving Earth</b> Organic Raw Dark Chocolate               | 3                          | 6             | ✓                           |                     | ✓                 | 100        | 72        | 7.90                |

#### MILK CHOCOLATE

| Brand/product (in order of experts' score)                  | Experts' score (out of 10) | Staff ranking | Ethical trade policies only | Fairtrade certified | Organic certified | Weight (g) | Cocoa (%) | Price per 100g (\$) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|---------------------|
| <b>Just Organic</b> (Aldi) Fairtrade Organic Milk Chocolate | 7.2                        | 3             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 35        | 1.99                |
| <b>Cocolo</b> Milk Premium Organic Fairtrade Chocolate      | 6.5                        | 5             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 32        | 5.50                |
| <b>Green &amp; Black's</b> Organic Milk Chocolate           | 5.7                        | 2             |                             | ✓                   | ✓                 | 100        | 34        | 3.59                |
| <b>Vivani</b> Organic Milk                                  | 5.3                        | 4             | ✓                           |                     | ✓                 | 100        | 33        | 5.20                |
| <b>Cadbury Dairy</b> Milk Chocolate                         | 4.7                        | 1             |                             | ✓                   |                   | 200        | 26        | 2.15                |

#### USING THE TABLES

**Experts score** each chocolate on a scale of 1-10, "1" being poor and "10" being amazing. Scores are then averaged. **Staff rank** Chocolates are ranked according to staff taste test scores, with "1" being the most preferred. **Ethical trade policies only** refers to a company that is not Fairtrade-certified, but has ethical trading policies in line with fair trade principles. **Price per 100g** is based on prices paid in Sydney stores in October and November, 2010.

USER & EXPERT TRIAL

# Ethical chocolate on test

We invited 30 CHOICE staff members and three experts (see Meet the Experts, page 15) to taste 11 fair trade and organic chocolate blocks – five milk and six dark. In general, despite their premium price, most are pretty ordinary; it seems you buy organic and fair-trade chocolate for a clear conscience rather than the taste. However, our experts say there are a few in the bunch that compare favourably with good commercial blocks.

## DARK CHOCOLATE

Our staff and expert didn't agree on the milk chocolate, but there was general consensus on the dark. **Alter Eco Dark Chocolate Velvet Touch of Organic Milk** topped the staff panel test, with Green & Black's coming a close second; these two tied for the top spot with the experts. Alter Eco caused a little controversy, however; its high cocoa butter content and the presence of milk mean it can't be considered a true dark chocolate. Some of the hard-core dark chocolate lovers among the staff complained that it was "too soft and sweet for a dark chocolate" and "disappointing". Our in-house expert judge, Fiona Mair, also marked it down for its similarity to milk chocolate, but would have scored it well in that category. With a higher cocoa content than regular milk chocolate, it could be considered a dark chocolate for the milk chocolate lover.

**Green & Black's Organic Dark Chocolate**, on the other hand, is a more authentic dark chocolate. Staff noted it "wasn't too sweet" and has the "right amount of bitterness", with a "nice dark chocolate flavour". David Gee said that, while Green & Black's is "not super high quality, you could eat a whole bar and be

happy". It is also a good value-for-money option.

Loving Earth deserves a dishonourable mention, with both the staff panel and experts placing it last. Staff commented on its dry, granular texture and vaguely chemical aftertaste. Mathew Gee said it had "one of the worst textures I have ever seen on a commercial chocolate". David agreed, commenting that it was "unrefined" and "more like a slice than a chocolate bar". Not only is it the worst-performing chocolate, it is also the most expensive at \$7.90 a bar.

However, this was the only raw chocolate in the test, included because it looks and is packaged like a traditional chocolate block. As the cocoa isn't heated during the production process, this product isn't going to have the same texture as regular chocolate. The agave used instead of sugar also adds to its different flavour. If eating raw food appeals to you, you may find this product appealing – just don't expect it to be exactly like regular chocolate.

## MILK CHOCOLATE

Our staff panel and experts didn't see eye-to-eye on the milk chocolates (see table, left). **Cadbury Dairy Milk** topped the list for the staff panel, but came bottom for the experts. With all plain Dairy Milk blocks now carrying Fairtrade certification, it was interesting to see how it fared against the lesser known brands. Staff found it "sweet" and "pleasant" – "a good, traditional-tasting milk chocolate". It didn't score quite so well for some of the dark chocolate lovers in the group, who found it too sweet and tasteless – "lacking cocoa flavour". Our experts were of the same mind, commenting that Cadbury was "an average chocolate bar – not

unpleasant, but not top-ranking" and "commercial and ordinary, with not many redeeming features".

The experts scored **Aldi's Just Organic Milk** at the top. While they deemed Cocolo to have a more complex flavour profile, with dairy notes, Just Organic is better overall. "It's the best value-for-money chocolate out of all of them – excellent quality for \$1.99 a block," said David Gee. It also covers all organic and Fairtrade certification bases.

Green & Black's fared quite well among the staff panel, with Just Organic claiming third place and Cocolo rounding out the bottom of the list.



## JARGON BUSTER

**Fairtrade** refers to the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation International (FLO) and its certification scheme.

**Fair trade** refers to the movement as a whole.





STORY UTA MIHM

# The risky gift of gift cards

Gift cards can be a convenient Christmas present, but if you don't choose carefully you could be flushing your money away.

## NUTSHELL

>> More than one in two CHOICE members has had a gift card expire before using its full value.  
>> We surveyed 15 popular gift cards and recommend three for your Christmas stocking.

**T**hinking about giving a gift card for Christmas? You're not alone; about \$1.5 billion worth of gift cards were purchased in the last financial year. And CHOICE members are no exception: about three in four participants in a recent survey told us they'd received at least one gift card in the past 12 months, with a similar proportion giving one as a present in the same period. More than half experienced the biggest pitfall of gift cards – it expired before they were able to use its full value.

We looked at 15 gift cards from major retailers and found three to recommend (see below). We also examined how stores handle lost and stolen cards, and other drawbacks.

## WHAT TO BUY



**O**f the gift cards we looked at, we recommend the following three:

- **Bunnings gift card** This card does not expire and also allows you to receive a small amount of cash change (up to \$9.95).
- **Coles Group & Myer and Wish (Woolworths group) gift cards** According to a survey by the University of Melbourne and Cardlimbo, about 20% of gift card recipients wouldn't usually shop at their card's store(s) and many let those cards expire unused. Both these cards allow you to buy everyday items such as groceries, so you shouldn't have trouble finding somewhere to use them.

## Gift card pitfalls

**Expiry dates** Will the card be honoured after this date? Of the gift cards we looked at, the Bunnings card does not expire at all, David Jones say they will exchange expired cards for new ones and JB Hi-Fi say they will always honour their gift cards, even after they've expired. A large number of card providers told CHOICE they allow a grace period (usually one month) after the card has expired.

Be especially wary of cards that state only their issue date rather than the expiry date (they usually also state the time period for expiry after the issue date), which is the case for Coles, Coles Group & Myer, JB Hi-Fi, Big W, iTunes, Village Cinemas, Westfield and Myer gift cards.

You should also be able to conveniently check the remaining value on the gift card. While most allow you to do so via a website or dedicated customer phone number, others require you to check the balance in-store.

**Gift cards not honoured for transactions less than a specified amount** You cannot use the Dymocks gift card for amounts less than \$5, so if there is \$4.50 left on your card and you want to buy something for this amount (such as a greetings card), your only option is to buy something more expensive and pay the amount above the value on the card. While none of the other cards we looked at have such conditions, there are those that cannot be used for a sale under \$10 or even \$20.

**Lost or stolen cards** You normally have to treat your gift card like cash – if you lose it, it's gone. However, some retailers allow you to cancel and re-issue a card you've bought, sometimes for a fee (see table, opposite). Conditions apply, so hold onto your receipts for gift cards and jot down details such as the card number.

**Restrictions about which shops accept the card** You can usually only use a gift card in a specific store or group of stores, such as the Coles Group & Myer gift card and Woolworths Wish card. Shopping centre cards, such as Westfield, can be used in a wider variety of stores, but note that it's not accepted by all stores in a Westfield shopping

## BEWARE VISA & MASTERCARD GIFT CARD FEES

**V**isa and MasterCard gift cards are available from your bank, retail stores or online. They can be used at most retailers or businesses that accept Visa or MasterCard, so they're valid at many more places than other gift cards.

The downside is their fees. There is usually a purchase fee (\$5.95, for example), and there may also be fees of up to \$4.50 for checking the card's balance over the phone (less expensive or free online or automated phone services may be available).

These gift cards usually expire after 12 months and any remaining balance is lost. They usually must be treated like cash [most lost or stolen cards won't be refunded], although a few cards can be replaced, so check carefully.

Some cards allow you to reload them and don't expire. However, read the fine print carefully as reload and monthly fees can apply, as can a transaction fee every time you use the card. The retailer may also charge you a surcharge for using a Visa/MasterCard; for more, turn to our story on credit card surcharges (page 30).

centre – in particular, none of the Coles group (except Kmart), Myer or Woolworths group stores accepts it. **Will you get change?** For most cards, the answer is no, but you can use the card again if you haven't used the full amount. Of the cards we looked at, only the Bunnings card allows change up to \$9.95, providing you with a new gift card for the rest of the difference.

**Fees and charges** Fees are mainly a problem with Visa and MasterCard gift cards (see above). Most retailer cards have no fees, with some exceptions; the Westfield gift card charges a \$1.95 issue fee, and while Red Balloon allows an extension of their experience vouchers for up to three months, there is a hefty \$10 charge per month for this or a \$30 charge for a one-month extension if the voucher has expired.

### CHOICE VERDICT

Under new regulations in the US, gift cards must have an expiry date of at least five years – much longer than almost all the cards we looked at. Under those regulations, good disclosure of pitfalls such as fees is also mandatory. In Australia, unfair contracts legislation can be used to take action against particularly unfair terms and conditions for gift cards. If you have any complaints, please email us at [money@choice.com.au](mailto:money@choice.com.au). ■

### GIFT CARDS COMPARED

| Gift card (listed alphabetically within groups) | Variable amount * | Online shopping possible | Expiry period after purchase (months) | Lost/stolen cards replaced ** |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>CHOICE RECOMMENDED</b>                       |                   |                          |                                       |                               |
| Bunnings                                        |                   |                          | No expiry                             |                               |
| Coles Group & Myer (A)                          | ✓                 |                          | 24                                    |                               |
| Wish (Woolworths) (B)                           | ✓                 | ✓                        | 12 (F)                                | ✓                             |
| <b>THE REST</b>                                 |                   |                          |                                       |                               |
| ABC Shop                                        | ✓                 | ✓                        | 12 (F)                                | ✓                             |
| Big W (B)                                       | ✓                 | ✓                        | 12 (F)                                | ✓                             |
| Coles                                           | ✓                 |                          | 24 (F)                                |                               |
| David Jones                                     | ✓                 |                          | 24 (G)                                |                               |
| Dymocks                                         | ✓                 | ✓                        | 12                                    | ✓                             |
| Hoyts Cinemas                                   | ✓                 |                          | 12 (F)                                |                               |
| iTunes                                          |                   | ✓                        | 24 (H)                                |                               |
| JB Hi-Fi                                        | ✓                 | ✓                        | 12 (J)                                | ✓                             |
| Myer                                            | ✓                 |                          | 24                                    |                               |
| Red Balloon (C)                                 |                   | ✓                        | 6-12 (C)                              | (K)                           |
| Village Cinemas                                 | ✓ (E)             | ✓                        | 12 (F)                                |                               |
| Westfield (D)                                   | ✓                 |                          | 12                                    | ✓                             |

**TABLE NOTES** \* Allows variable amounts such as \$39.50; normally there is a minimum of \$5 or \$10 and an upper limit. \*\*A fee may apply. (A) Valid at Myer, Target, Baby Target, Target Country, Kmart, Kmart Tyre & Auto, Coles, Coles Central, BI-LD, Pick n' Pay Hypermarkets, Liquorland, Vintage Cellars, 1st Choice Liquor Superstore and Officeworks stores. (B) Valid at Woolworths & Safeway Supermarkets, Woolworths & Safeway Liquor, BIG W, Dan Murphy's, BWS, Thomas Dux Grocer, participating Dick Smith stores and participating Caltex fuel outlets. (C) Red Balloon offers three types of vouchers: "experience vouchers" with six months expiry, "range vouchers" and gift certificates with 12 months expiry. Experience vouchers can be extended for \$10 per month for a maximum of three months; if the voucher has expired it can be extended for one month for \$30 within 30 days. (D) Not accepted by all stores in a Westfield shopping centre – check [www.westfield.com.au](http://www.westfield.com.au) for details and look for the "W" icon next to the store name. None of the Coles group stores (except Kmart), Myer or Woolworths group stores accept it. \$1.95 issue fee applies. (E) \$30 minimum. (F) Grace period applies – usually one month. (G) David Jones told us they will replace expired gift cards with a new one if it's presented in-store; balance must be more than \$5. (H) The latter of two years from the date of issuance or last activity on an iTunes Store account. (J) Can be extended to 24 months; JB Hi-Fi told us they will honour expired gift cards. (K) Gift cards purchased online only.

**You normally have to treat your gift card like cash – if you lose it, it's gone**

### DID YOU KNOW?

## Converting unwanted gift cards to cash

**A** new website, [www.cardlimbo.com.au](http://www.cardlimbo.com.au), allows you to sell unwanted gift cards from about 100 retailers for 60% to 90% of their value and buy second-hand cards for 70%-96% of their value. Cardlimbo also allows you to donate gift cards to charity.

STORY TANYA FONG

## CHOICE Christmas cheer

**F**inding the perfect gift takes planning – it has to be within budget, look good, perform well and delight the recipient. With so many options plus the mad festive rush, making the right choice can be difficult, so

we've picked the best buys from gadgets to kitchen appliances. For the full gift guide and to access our new Price and Buy function – only available for some products – go to [www.choice.com.au/christmas](http://www.choice.com.au/christmas). Happy shopping! ■

### Looking good

#### MINERAL FOUNDATION

##### Nude by Nature Natural Mineral Cover (\$39.95 / 15g)

If you're looking for a mineral foundation without a long list of ingredients and preservatives, Nude by Nature is a standout. Its coverage score and ease of application ranked among the best in our user trial, which included Elizabeth Arden, MAC and Revlon. It retails in most Target stores at \$39.95, plus \$14.95 for a brush sold separately. Jump online to the Nude by Nature website – [www.nudebynature.com.au](http://www.nudebynature.com.au) – where you may be able to score a free trial.



#### HAIR DRYERS

**Wahl SupaDryer (\$80)** Don't diss this dryer for its pink finish. Among the 14 hair dryers we trialed, the Wahl wowed trialists with controls that are easy to read and use. It's our Best

Buy because it has all the functions you need: ionic, ceramic, volumiser to primp your tresses for a big night out.



#### BODY FAT SCALES

**Visage Body Analyzing 4527 (\$20)** Body fat scales measure water, bone and muscle composition. This set costs just \$20 and is stylishly designed, with a sleek-looking black slate [see CHOICE, November 2009, page 48]. The catch is that these scales are only available at Aldi, so check your nearest Aldi store early for stock.



### The great outdoors

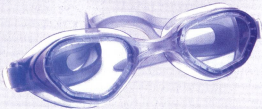
#### COOLERS Coleman 47L Wheeled Cooler (\$120)

Most people assume coolers are leak-proof, but this isn't always the case. The Coleman is, however, and has a drain hole that saves you having to tip out melted ice to clean the cooler. It also has pull handles and wheels – similar to those on a hard travel suitcase – which makes it easy to drag around. Of the 11 soft and hard eskies we tested (see CHOICE, November 2010, page 44), the Coleman is one of the coolest; it clocked up the longest time [28 minutes] for the temperature to rise from five to eight degrees.



#### GOOGLES

**Torpedo Omega (\$7, pictured)** When it comes to goggles, many swimmers choose to go with big brands – but trialists in our user trial swam against the tide to recommend this cheapie pair that set the gold standard for watertightness. The other surprise find is the **Tyr Stealth 2 (\$13)**, which has silicone eyecups and straps and scored second-highest for watertightness. The Torpedo set are only available at Kmart.



#### NUTSHELL

>> We line up our Best Buys for a range of ideal Christmas gifts.

>> Go to CHOICE Online to find out more – [www.choice.com.au](http://www.choice.com.au) – and once you've found the right product, use our new Price and Buy function to buy online at the right price.

## Gadgets

### SMARTPHONE



**HTC Desire (\$500)** Touted as the "iPhone killer", the Desire sports a finger-operated touchscreen similar to the iPhone's but uses the latest Android 2.2 operating system. It delivers a good web browsing experience with easy email setup, and is one of the best performers for call sound quality. The recommended retail price is about \$779, but by using our Price and Buy service you can grab one for just \$500.

### BASIC PHONE

**Nokia 3720 Classic (\$269)** This is a good basic phone and readily available between \$140 and \$170 using Price and Buy. The 3720 GSM-only phone (which works on the national GSM network, so it's not ideal for web surfing or downloads) has an IP54 rating, meaning it's designed to be shock, dust and water-resistant, with panels to keep out water and dust. An LED flashlight, together with a long talk and standby time, makes it a good choice for tradespeople or as a first phone for kids (see *CHOICE*, July 2010, page 46).



### NOISE CANCELLING HEADPHONES

**Bose QuietComfort 15 (\$499)** Audiophiles may be hard-pressed to choose between the Sennheiser (German) and Bose (American), but we believe the Bose QuietComfort 15 reigns supreme for both performance and price. With the Aussie dollar now on par with the Greenback, you can save money if you know someone who's travelling to the US and will be back by Christmas. There's little benefit buying online, as sites such as Amazon.com charge at least US\$70 for shipping.



### POCKET CAMCORDER

**Flip Ultra HD (\$240)** This pocket camcorder delivers top results for visual and audio quality without breaking the bank (see *CHOICE*, July 2010, page 51). Flip Ultra HD's maximum recording time is 135 minutes, almost double that of a Sanyo model that costs twice as much. The Flip Ultra HD is not the smallest camcorder, but will still slip easily into most pockets, is ready for action in just 2.5 seconds and plays with a HDMI connection – the easiest way to display the video and audio on a plasma or LCD TV.



## For the kitchen

### ESPRESSO MACHINE

**Sunbeam Café Espresso Stainless EM3800 (\$199)**

This is a great Christmas gift for someone who's keen to make their own espresso at home. Among 19 machines tested by our experts (see *CHOICE*, March 2010, page 54), the Sunbeam is one of the most inexpensive and easy to use and delivers on taste. It scored lower than a similar Sunbeam model on test, but we recommend the EM3800 as it seems more durable than the Sunbeam EM5600.



### CENTRIFUGAL JUICER

**Breville BJE200 Juice Fountain (\$170)** Generally, juicers can be hard to clean because they're too large to fit into a domestic sink. However, this problem is easily solved if you buy a juicer that comes with removable key parts such as the blade/sieve and pulp container. We recommend the Breville BJE200 Juice Fountain because it's simple (one-speed only), cheap and does the job. The good news is we found one on Getprice.com.au for just \$99.



### BREADMAKER

**Sunbeam Bakehouse BM3500S (\$159)**

Making your own bread at home is a healthy and less expensive alternative. The Sunbeam Bakehouse BM3500S is very good for making multigrain bread from scratch and also delivers a good result when using a pre-mix (see *CHOICE*, July 2010, page 41). It's easy to use and includes extra settings for wholemeal rapid, jam, pasta dough, damper and cake.



### NON-CENTRIFUGAL JUICER

**Healthstart Compact Multipurpose Juicer & Mincer (\$299)**

This non-centrifugal juicer, the least expensive on test, scored highest for performance. We evaluated each juicer's abilities and looked for juice that was smooth rather than pulpy, grainy or frothy. Most non-centrifugal juicer manufacturers claim that juice made by these machines is more nutritious and will stay fresh and tasty for up to 48 hours. We tested that claim, and sure enough the Healthstart passed.



**CHOICE  
ONLINE**

For the full Christmas gift guide and to access our Price and Buy service for selected products, log on to [www.choice.com.au/christmas](http://www.choice.com.au/christmas).





STORY REBECCA GATTO

## From paddock to plate

How does supermarket beef stack up against beef from specialised butchers? And what makes for the juiciest, most tender steak? CHOICE finds out.

### NUTSHELL

>> CHOICE puts cuts of steak from Aldi, Coles and Woolworths before a panel of experts to see how they compare with the same cuts from budget and premium butchers.

>> Knowing what to look for in your steak is a better way to guarantee quality than simply paying more.

**B**eefsteak is a versatile meat. You can barbecue, grill, stir-fry, pan-fry or roast it as well as use it in casseroles. By adding vegetables, you have a balanced meal. When buying steak, these days you're likely to be bombarded with claims of "grain-fed", "grass-fed", "organic", "aged", "marbled" and, increasingly, "Angus beef". Do any of these labels really impact on the final product? Is all this labelling more confusing than helpful? For consumers, knowing what to look for in steak and understanding the jargon is your best guarantee of quality (see opposite and Jargon Buster, page 25).

CHOICE recruited three experts (see opposite) to assess six cuts of steak – rump, sirloin, Scotch fillet, T-bone, blade and fillet – from Aldi, Coles and Woolworths to see how they compare against cuts from budget and premium specialist butchers. Overall, the meat from the premium butcher set the standard; while clearly the most expensive, it rated well in all categories, though we did find some inconsistency (see Premium Inconsistency, page 24). However, our experts were also impressed with the supermarkets – Coles in particular, which rated as highly or almost as highly as the premium butcher for some cuts. By contrast, Woolworths, like the budget butcher, was hit

and miss across categories, despite generally offering the best value for money. Aldi only offered three of the six cuts, but performed well overall in those categories. Note, however, our story on page 28 about the tricks supermarkets use to keep produce looking fresh.

As with specialists, inconsistency between supermarket stores is an issue.

### Which cut and where to buy it?

**RUMP** is a great all-rounder. Our experts picked Aldi and the **premium butcher** as offering the best quality rump. Based on the prices we paid, you could save at least \$9 per kilo by buying your rump from Aldi. Woolworths and Coles were close behind for quality but not price savings. Our budget butcher offered the lowest-cost cut, but it was also the lowest quality. According to our experts, the meat was dull in colour, unappealing to the eye and with connective tissue throughout, so would likely be tough when cooked.

**SIRLOIN**, also known as porterhouse, New York or striploin, is a favourite for its firm texture and rich flavour. The lowest-priced cut at \$18 per kilo was from **Woolworths**, and our experts were pleased with its bright red colour. This type of steak should be trimmed of its fat and have a nice amount of marbling for a good flavour.

**SCOTCH FILLET**, also known as cube roll, boneless rib eye or rib fillet, is a juicy, tender and flavoursome piece of steak. At about \$35 per kilo, the **premium butcher** cut rated best, followed closely by **Coles**, which was also comparatively expensive at \$30 per kilo. They both received top marks for their bright colour and acceptable level of fat, which makes the meat tender and full of flavour. The lowest-cost scotch fillet, at \$15 per kilo from Woolworths, also rated lowest. The experts said it had a dull colour, which suggests the meat had been cut for some time, and minimal fat, which could make it dry and tough when cooked.

### HOW WE TEST

CHOICE buys six different cuts of steak (rump, sirloin, scotch fillet, T-bone, blade and fillet) from a premium and a budget butcher as well as the major supermarket chains Woolworths, Coles and Aldi (although Aldi only had rump, sirloin and scotch fillet). A blind assessment is conducted in which three experts are presented with each cut on a plain white plate. They assess the raw meat (no taste test) for quality, including aspects such as colour, marbling and amount of fat, then give each piece an overall rating.



**T-BONE** The classic barbecue steak consists of fillet on the smaller side of the bone and sirloin on the larger side. Once again, **Coles** performed just as well as the **premium butcher**, despite being less expensive by almost \$10 per kilo. Our experts said the colour of the bone is a big indicator of freshness; it should have a fresh whitish colour.

**BLADE** is a comparatively inexpensive cut, no matter where you buy it. The poor performance of the budget butcher in this group was notable; our experts said its dark colour suggested poor storage and age and was unlikely to appeal to consumers. It had minimal marbling but a large amount of connective tissue, which would cause the steak to be tough – not to mention, its dull grey fat would make it taste sour.

**FILLET**, also known as eye fillet or tenderloin, is one of the more expensive cuts of steak but also one of the tenderest. All sources performed reasonably well in this group. With no outside fat cover and just a little bit of marbling, this steak is juicy and very tender.

### What's your beef?

New beef labelling legislation rolled out in New South Wales on 31 August aims to help consumers choose cuts of meat that are suited to their specific needs (see **CHOICE**, October 2010, page 4). Beef will be categorised based on age (yearling, young, intermediate, mature and economy), >

### MEET THE EXPERTS

**Vince Vocisano** has 11 years' experience as a butcher and owns Pappandrea Quality Meats in Smithfield, NSW.

**Darren O'Rourke** has 20 years' experience in the hospitality industry and is a butcher at Victor Churchill in Woolahra, NSW.

**Keith Ireland** has been involved in the meat retail industry for 44 years, including 19 in retail shops and 25 as a TAFE teacher.



You can judge the freshness of a T-bone steak by the colour of the bone, which should be distinctly white

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

#### Fine texture and firm to touch

A piece of steak that holds its structure well is ideal. Meat should not feel slimy and if there is blood, it should not be congealed.

**Bright cherry-red colour** indicates freshness. Some meat may appear brown if other items have been resting on it because it hasn't been able to receive any oxygen; the red colour should come back once it's again exposed to oxygen.

Stay away from meat that has a brownish and/or grey tinge, as it will have a sour taste when cooked.

**Marbling** appears as threads of fat running through the meat and increases its juiciness, tenderness and flavour. Keep in mind it's still

possible to achieve good eating quality without marbling.

**Use-by date** is critical if you're buying pre-packaged meat. Meat normally has a use-by of about five days if stored correctly. If you're buying pre-packaged, also check that it doesn't have excessive moisture at the bottom of the package, which can lead to the meat being dry when cooked.

**Thickness** Where possible, always buy steak of consistent thickness, so that it cooks evenly.

**Colour of fat/bone** should be whitish. If the fat is brownish in colour, you may experience a sour taste once it's cooked. With T-bone steak, freshness can be largely determined by the colour of the bone; like fat, it should have a whitish colour.

**Smell** This is harder to assess if you buy pre-packaged meat. Old meat will smell rancid and unpleasant. Ask the butcher or retailer if the meat is **MSA certified**. If so, they should be able to give you information about the recommended cooking style to ensure good eating quality.



### BARBECUES

Now that you've found your perfect piece of steak, turn to page 48 to find out the best barbecue for cooking it on this summer.

**New beef legislation in NSW means that any claims such as "grain-fed" or "organic" must be accurate and proven**

< with the youngest cuts (yearling) warranting a premium price and the oldest cuts (economy) being least expensive. Unfortunately, these guidelines were developed by a beef industry committee with no consumer input or testing to ensure they are meaningful to those who need it most. On the plus side, any claims such as "organic" or "grain-fed" must now be accurate and substantiated, whereas under the previous system they were self-regulated. Time will tell if this system really is beneficial to consumers.

By contrast, Meat Standards Australia (MSA) has developed a scientific grading system that predicts the eating quality of a cut of steak. More than 80,000 people participated in MSA consumer testing, which covered more than 560,000 beef samples. The MSA score takes into consideration the tenderness, juiciness, flavour and overall liking of different cuts of meat to give one of three quality levels: MSA3 (tenderness guaranteed), MSA4 (premium tenderness) or MSA5 (supreme tenderness). The label includes the MSA grade, the cooking method for the best

result, as well as ageing information. The system also takes into consideration all factors from paddock to plate that can affect the eating quality of meat.

Producers need to be registered with MSA and their livestock must meet the MSA pathway requirements to be eligible for an MSA grade. To use the MSA trademark, meat brands, processors, wholesalers, retailers and restaurants must be trained and licensed. Each of the licences are third-party audited. You can find a list of the licensed processors and wholesalers on the Meat & Livestock Australia website ([www.mla.com.au](http://www.mla.com.au)).

## What affects the eating quality of steak?

The overall eating quality of beef is largely out of consumer control. The best carcass can be reduced to low-quality, unacceptable meat at any point during the two-week pre-slaughter period up to the first few hours post-slaughter. MSA says damage is mainly caused by changes in muscle glycogen (energy reserve); while feeding increases glycogen, stress rapidly reduces it. Keeping the cattle calm by reducing stress (such as environmental factors) pre-slaughter helps keep glycogen levels high.

Some of the other major factors that MSA says can affect eating quality include:

- **pH levels** The ideal pH range is between 5.30-5.70. Levels above 5.70 result in dark-cutting meat (purple rather than bright red), coarse texture and reduced shelf life. While cooking, the meat tends to lose a lot of moisture, making it tough to eat. At the point of slaughter, muscle glycogen is converted to lactic acid, which decreases the pH. High energy (glycogen) levels in the cattle pre-slaughter will enable the pH to fall within the ideal range.
- **Marbling** is intramuscular fat appearing as small streaks of fat scattered throughout the muscle. This fat is the last to be deposited and first to be used by the animal as a primary energy source, so cattle must be on a high nutritional diet to keep the marbling throughout the meat. According to our experts, marbling helps make the meat tasty and tender; stress and fasting pre-slaughter rapidly decrease the level of marbling.
- **Hanging method during chilling** The carcass can be hung by the traditional method (the Achilles tendon) or the tenderstretch method (suspended by the pelvis). The tenderstretch technique is said to improve the eating quality of many cuts in the hindquarter (such as rump and sirloin).
- **Ageing** occurs as the muscle fibres in meat break down and become weakened. Aged beef has good eating quality and is usually more tender. Meat is generally aged for 14 days (MSA requirements range from five to 35 days), after which time the amount of change is minimal. All our experts praise aged beef for its superior



## PREMIUM INCONSISTENCY

When you pay top price at a premium butcher, you expect to receive top quality. However, our review found premium butchers may not always give the best quality every time. In the first run, our premium butcher didn't perform up to standard. We put it to the test a second time and also included meat from an additional premium butcher. This time, both premium butchers performed to a standard of high quality. For consumers, knowing what to look for in steak is a better guarantee of quality than simply paying more at a premium butcher (see What To Look For, page 23).

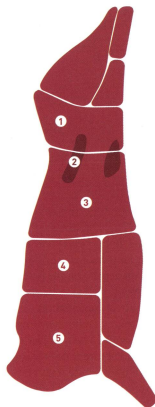
## WHICH PIECE OF MEAT IS BEST FOR WHICH PURPOSE?

|               | Oven-roast | Pan-fry | Stir-fry | Grill / char-grill | Braise / casserole | Shabu-shabu (Japanese variant of hot pot) | Barbecue |
|---------------|------------|---------|----------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------|
| Rump          | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |
| Sirloin       | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |
| Scotch fillet | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |
| T-bone        | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |
| Blade         | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |
| Fillet        | ✓          | ✓       | ✓        | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                                         | ✓        |

flavour and texture, but bear in mind it generally comes with a higher price tag.

- **Hormone Growth Promotants (HGP)s** are supplements of naturally occurring hormones used by some producers to help cattle meet market weight at an earlier age. They're placed under the skin on the back of the ear of the cattle, releasing low doses of hormones. In general, marbling is reduced in treated cattle; MSA claims HGPs adversely affect the eating quality of some cuts.
- **Cooking methods** also impact on eating quality (see Which Piece of Meat is Best for Which Purpose?, opposite). Muscles are made up of fibre groups surrounded and supported by connective tissue. The amount of connective tissue in a piece of meat is related to the amount and type of work that particular muscle has to do, which is why certain cuts of meat are more tender than others; blade muscles, for example, are constantly used and so have high connective tissue content. This type of meat is best for casseroles, as the slow cooking process helps break down the connective tissue. By contrast, a muscle such as the fillet (tenderloin) does very little work and has almost no connective tissue, resulting in a very tender piece of meat. In a casserole, the fillet's structure would be completely broken down, so it is better suited to pan-frying or grilling. ■

## AUSTRALIAN BEEF CUTS ON TEST



- 1 Rump
- 2 Fillet
- 3 Sirloin
- 4 Scotch fillet
- 5 Blade

(Note: T-bone is fillet on the smaller side of the bone and sirloin on the larger side.)



### CHOICE ONLINE

To see the list of organic-certifying organisations, go to [www.choice.com.au/organicmeat](http://www.choice.com.au/organicmeat)

To see how to cook a steak, log on to Cook's CHOICE: [www.choice.com.au/steak](http://www.choice.com.au/steak)

## JARGON BUSTER

**Grain-fed vs. pasture-fed** All cattle are grass-fed at the beginning of their life cycle (up to two years). In the final months, grain-fed cattle move onto a feedlot for at least 60 days on a high-energy, grain-based feed. This feeding regime results in a consistent meat and fat colour, often with high levels of marbling. Certification for grain-fed beef is administered through the National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme and audited by AUS-MEAT, the industry body responsible for maintaining national standards for meat production and processing. Alternatively, pasture-fed cattle are raised on open grazing land with supplemental feed comprised of various grasses. Our experts had mixed views on which they prefer, with one claiming pasture-fed cattle

are "as close to natural as possible. Altering the feeding regimes can take away the natural flavour". Also keep in mind the environmental implications of grain-fed beef.

**Organic meat** must comply with the National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce. All organic beef is pasture-fed and must not use growth promotants or feed produced with synthetic pesticides or genetically modified inputs. It is expensive to produce and usually comes at a premium price. To ensure you're buying guaranteed organic beef, look for one of the seven logos from organic-certifying organisations (see Choice Online, above right).

**Angus** is a cattle breed developed in Scotland in the late 1700s. Its meat has a smooth, close-grained

texture, carnation-red colour and finely marbled fat within the lean muscle. Certified Australian Angus Beef (CAAB) is an industry-quality assurance program whereby products carrying the CAAB logo guarantees Angus genetics produced to exact specifications. One of our experts said Angus are "fantastic cattle that produce superior beef as well as consistent return to the producer and product to the consumer."

**Wagyu** is a group of cattle breeds from Japan, more likely to be grain-fed and genetically predisposed to intense marbling. It also has a higher percentage of the healthier unsaturated fat than any other cattle breed in the world. Considered a luxury item, it can cost up to \$250 per kilo for the best cuts.



STORY BRENDAN MAYS

## Cards on the table

When it comes to charity-branded Christmas cards, you may not be donating as much as you'd expect.

### NUTSHELL

>> Whenever you purchase a charity-branded Christmas card, you are entering into a business transaction, which means not all the money will go to the charity.

Check to make sure you approve of the proportion donated.

>> A direct donation (not linked to merchandise) is still the most effective way to contribute to a cause you value.

**D**onating to charity in the festive season is a bit like dishing up Christmas pudding – it all tastes good, but not everyone gets the same sized slice. How much of the proverbial pudding a charity receives can depend on the type of donation – buying a product linked to a charity is not the same as making a direct contribution.

A recent CHOICE online survey found that almost 70% of respondents would choose a lower-quality or higher-priced Christmas card if it meant supporting a charity. However, we also found that even savvy consumers can misunderstand how much of their dollar is donated when purchasing charity-branded products. That's why it is important to check the exact amount being handed over (usually listed on the packaging) and be certain you're comfortable with that amount.

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### A shining example

**C**harity Connections is a small organisation run from a shop in the Southern Cross Arcade in the Adelaide CBD. Through the dedicated hard work of long-serving local volunteers and a loyal customer base, Charity Connections donates 79% of every dollar spent to 45 different charities. "While we are relatively well-known as the Christmas card shop, we also stock other cards and wonderful giftware and we're open all year round," says Libby Kosmala, Charity Connections Ambassador and Paralympic gold medalist.

The shop is also accessible online at [www.charityconnections.com.au](http://www.charityconnections.com.au) and has a new PayPal system for ordering, purchase and delivery, including to interstate and remote areas. This is a great way to access the Christmas cards you want while donating to a cause of your choice.

### Cause-related marketing

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is when a business aligns itself with a charity; typically, charity branding is applied to a product in exchange for a portion of the sales. In effect, consumers can choose to buy a product to support the charity in question.

Buying charity Christmas cards can be a great way to make a small contribution while purchasing necessary items, provided you're happy with the quality of the cards, the price and the amount being donated. However, giving directly guarantees the most significant donation to your preferred cause.

### Grinch-like or generous?

According to our online charity Christmas card survey, almost half the respondents expected that 20%-50% of the cost of a card would be donated to charity, while one in three expected that 51%-70% would go towards the listed cause.

Such expectations don't always align with reality. We found several charity Christmas card providers donating as little as 10% of the wholesale price of a card. Considering the retail price is usually higher than the wholesale price, this means the percentage of your money that is actually donated is even smaller. With the relatively low cost of most greetings cards, we're talking about a very small amount actually being contributed per card sale.

Despite the small percentage donation, significant sums can still be transferred to charities in this way. Flaming Rhino Design, one of the smaller greeting card providers we surveyed, which currently donates 10% of the wholesale price, has so far raised more than \$410,000 for its chosen charity, the Salvation Army, since 1997. "We appreciate our relationship with Flaming Rhino and recognise the need for different fundraising strategies," says Brad Halse from the Salvation Army.

Hallmark, Australia's largest greeting card provider, contributes a similar percentage of its card sales – 10% of the wholesale cost of nominated card box sets is

## DID YOU KNOW?

## Alternative charity gifts

Christmas is the time for giving, but it's also a period of hectic schedules. This can make organising a one-off charitable donation a challenging prospect, which is another reason charity-branded products are appealing. However, there are some other fun, interesting ways to give at Christmas. Most charities have their own gift catalogues, and contributing can be as simple as logging on to the website and choosing from the gifts and products on offer. Or you can donate money or a gift in someone else's honour.

- **The World Vision Smiles** program allows you to purchase anything from a garden, school pencils or even a goat for communities in need.

The recipient receives a card detailing the donation made on their behalf. See [www.worldvision.com.au/smiles](http://www.worldvision.com.au/smiles) for more.

- **The Kmart Wishing Tree Appeal** allows you to donate directly to children who need it most at your local Kmart store. You can choose to donate a gift (which does not have to be purchased at Kmart) and place it under the Wishing Tree, to be distributed via the Salvation Army.
- **Oxfam** has both online and retail stores that sell Christmas cards and more, with all proceeds supporting the work of Oxfam Australia. Visit [www.oxfamshop.org.au/christmascards](http://www.oxfamshop.org.au/christmascards) to see the cards on offer.



- **Unicef** has a long-running charity gifts program that's easy to browse and purchase from online at [www.shop.unicef.org.au](http://www.shop.unicef.org.au). Best of all, a high percentage of the profits goes to supporting Unicef's important work.

donated to its chosen charity, the National Breast Cancer Foundation, at both Christmas and Mother's Day. This has resulted in donations totalling more than \$1 million since the program began in 2002.

"The public has the right to ask what percentage of the purchase price of Christmas cards is going to the charity," says Chris McMillan, CEO of the Fundraising Institute of Australia (FIA). "The onus is then on the charity to ensure a reasonable proportion is going to the cause."

For those looking to contribute more, several greeting card providers do donate a higher percentage amount. One of the best we found was the small, dedicated team at Charity Connections, which gives an impressive 79% (see A Shining Example, opposite). Going directly to your chosen charity (such as through their website) is another way to ensure that the maximum amount goes to a cause. A model example is Cards4Kids.com.au, run purely to assist Barnardos, a charity dedicated to helping children facing abuse or neglect.

## Other reasons to buy charity cards

Of course, buying a charity Christmas card provides more than just the sum of your donation. While the fundraising is an important part of this activity, many organisations also see it as a way to raise awareness of a cause and a charity's name.

"Offering cards is just one way to engage people in our work at Christmas and spread brand awareness and goodwill," says Barnardos marketing director, Jill Atherton. "The most effective way to help the children we care for is still to give a direct donation. That said, Cards4Kids, the social enterprise that produces and sells our cards, provides a valuable income stream and we are very glad to provide our supporters with the opportunity to involve us in their Christmas celebrations."

## Christmas spirit where it counts

"Producing Christmas cards is an easy way for smaller charities to fundraise and an effective way for charities of all sizes to extend brand awareness," says McMillan. "However, purchasers need to be aware they're not making a [literal] donation when they purchase charity Christmas cards. They are receiving goods, so they cannot expect a substantial proportion of the purchase price to go to the charity's cause."

Charity Christmas cards are a great way to make a small contribution via an item you are likely to purchase anyway, but you still need to exercise buyer discretion in terms of price, quality and whether you are happy with the amount being donated. Just remember, donate directly if you want to make the highest value contribution for your dollar. ■

## NUMBER CRUNCH

## 86%

The percentage of CHOICE members surveyed who say the amount donated to charity is important to them.

## 22

The number of cards each Australian purchases every year.

## \$500m

The estimated retail value of the greeting card industry in Australia.





## NUTSHELL

>> Producers and supermarkets have clever ways to keep food looking good even when it has seen better days.

>> Extended storage and transportation across vast distances mean fruit and vegetables are less tasty and less nutritious; meat can still look good but contain risky levels of harmful bacteria.

>> Look beyond appearances when buying your fresh produce.

STORY DAVID OAKENFULL

# Keeping up appearances

CHOICE investigates the tricks that producers and supermarkets use to keep food looking good when it's far from truly fresh.

**T**he "fresh" food in supermarkets isn't always as fresh as you might think. Technological advances mean those succulent-looking lamb chops could have been butchered months ago, while shiny red apples may have been in storage for more than a year.

According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's *Food Descriptors Guideline*, "fresh" refers to food put on sale as early as possible and as close to the state it was in at the time of being picked, caught or produced. So are meat, fruit and vegetables that have been stored for an extended period still truly fresh?

## Tricks of the trade – fruit and vegetables

Most fruit and veg can be stored for at least a few weeks if the conditions are right. About four percent of our "fresh" fruit and veg comes from overseas. Grapes may be imported from the US (packed with sulphur dioxide to prevent mould growth), while asparagus can come from as far away as Peru.

Quality is further compromised when fruit is picked before it's fully ripe to make it easier to store and transport long distances. And varieties are often chosen more for ease of storage and transportation than for flavour.

Among the other tricks used to make food last the distance:

- **Fruit is often sprayed with fungicides** to prevent mould; imported fruit and vegetables may be fumigated with methyl bromide to comply with quarantine regulations.
- **Produce is chilled as soon as possible after harvest**, so that it deteriorates much more slowly.

- **Modified-atmosphere storage and packaging** (with lower levels of oxygen and higher levels of carbon dioxide than normal air) can further slow down deterioration.
- **1-methylcyclopropene (1-MCP)** is increasingly being used to extend the storage life of some fruit and vegetables even longer. This chemical blocks some of the biochemical changes that occur as fruit ripens and matures. Unfortunately, tests have shown that the fruit remains hard and 1-MCP also prevents production of chemical compounds that contribute to flavour. Nevertheless, it's already used extensively for apples and increasingly for other fruit, such as avocados and melons.

## Tricks of the trade – meat

Chilled beef mince can be stored for up to 44 days and cuts of lamb for up to 112. Some supermarkets still have their own butchery, but there's a trend (following the US and UK) to distribute pre-butchered meat from a central location. It's then either vacuum-packed or placed in special modified atmosphere packs for display. The gases used for these packs are carbon dioxide and nitrogen – the former inhibits growth of micro-organisms, while the latter is an inert filler.

The gas mixture may also contain a small amount of carbon monoxide, which reacts with myoglobin in the meat, producing a healthy-looking red colour even when the meat is far from fresh. Carbon monoxide is permitted as a food additive in Australia, but it's technically a "processing aid", which means it does not have to be declared on the label. Neither of the major supermarket chains would tell CHOICE whether they use carbon monoxide in packaging meat.

## Is freshness really an issue?

The short answer is yes; fruit and vegetables lose some vitamins from extended storage. English spinach, for example, retains only 53% of its folate and 54% of its carotene after just eight days stored at fridge temperatures, while apples held in cold storage for three months contain lower levels of antioxidants.

The substances that give fruit and vegetables their flavour are also easily lost. Apples kept in cold storage for too long have



## WHAT'S IN SEASON?

For current information about which fruit and veggies are at their best, see [www.seasonalfoodguide.com](http://www.seasonalfoodguide.com) or the following sites for specific areas (follow links to seasonal produce):

- **NSW & ACT:** [www.sydneymarkets.com.au](http://www.sydneymarkets.com.au)
- **Qld:** [www.brisbanemarkets.com.au](http://www.brisbanemarkets.com.au)
- **Tas:** [www.eatwelltas.com.au/seasonpage.php](http://www.eatwelltas.com.au/seasonpage.php)
- **Vic:** [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)  
(search for "in season").

less flavour and aroma; storage also affects texture and they can go floury quickly unless kept in the fridge. As vegetables age, they can develop unpleasant smells and bitter flavours, and droop or get tough and woody.

The extended storage time for meat made possible by new technology also poses health risks. Harmful bacteria can grow to dangerous levels while food remains attractive to the eye. *Clostridium botulinum* is of most concern because it can cause severe illness. Thorough cooking should kill most bacteria, but extra care is needed to make sure the meat is cooked right through, particularly for mince. Now that pre-packed meat can be stored for such a long time, a "packed on" date would be more helpful than "best before" or "use by".

### What you can do

- **Be wary of supermarkets** Based on our findings, you may find better quality and fresher produce at specialist butchers and fruit and vegetable shops than at your local supermarket (see below); farmers' markets can also be a source of good quality fresh produce. Organic meat, fruit and veggies are more likely to be locally produced and organic farmers often choose tastier cultivars, especially for fruit. Bear in mind, however, that you can still find good-quality meat at supermarkets, such as steak (see page 22) – inconsistency

between stores is the issue, as our seemingly contradictory findings would suggest.

- **Follow the seasons** Now that so much produce is available for most of the year, it's easy to lose track of its seasonality. Fruit and vegetables that are in season are likely to be fresher, tastier and more nutritious. What's in season at any one time varies across the country – see What's In Season?, opposite, for where to get current information for your area.
- **Choose ripe fruit** that's well coloured and with a bright appearance. Feel for a tender texture and smell the stem end for stone fruit and the blossom end for apples, tomatoes and melons. Only buy fruit with a full, fruity aroma.
- **Scrutinise your vegetables** Green vegetables should be crisp and not shrivelled or yellow. With broccoli and lettuce, check there's no rot at the end of the stem. If you don't like the look of what's on offer, you're probably better off buying frozen or canned vegetables. They may not be as crisp and crunchy, but frozen vegetables retain most of their nutrients and can be more nutritious than "fresh" vegetables that have been transported long distances. Canned vegetables (and fruit) also retain most of their original nutrients. They have less vitamin C, but the levels of dietary fibre, carotene and folate aren't much affected by the canning process – just watch out for added salt in some canned veggies. ■

**Quality is compromised when fruit is picked before it's fully ripe to make it easier to store and transport long distances**

### WHAT WE FOUND

**C**HOICE's tester went shopping for fresh fruit and vegetables with expert Dr Stephen Morris from the Sydney Postharvest Laboratory, and for meat with Ben Barrow (right), Head Teacher, Meat & Allied Trades, at Granville College of TAFE in Sydney.

**FRUIT AND VEG** The quality in supermarkets is highly variable. While some is good, there's also plenty of poor quality and products that are far from fresh. Examples we found were:

- Limp broccoli with brown discolouration where the stems were cut;
- Hard and tasteless apples likely to have been stored using 1-MCP;
- Grapes showing damage from long exposure to sulphur dioxide.

The overall quality depends largely on the competence of the staff responsible for fresh fruit and vegetables. Much the same applies to specialist shops; in some, the staff

care and are knowledgeable enough to stock only top-quality produce; in others, the quality isn't necessarily better than in supermarkets, even though it may be more expensive.

We also examined the quality and freshness of the fruit and vegetables sold at a farmers' market. While again there's no guarantee, the overall freshness and quality appeared to be better than equivalent produce in supermarkets – and stallholders often provide slices of fruit, such as apple, so you can taste before buying.

**MEAT** When comparing cuts of lamb and beef from supermarkets and independent butchers, Barrow says that generally the supermarket meat shows a poor standard of butchery (steaks, for example, not correctly cut). Both chains appear to be using inexperienced or poorly trained staff or are not giving their butchers enough time to do their job properly.

According to Woolies, most of their supermarkets have in-store butchers. Some of the meat is on black plastic trays covered with cling film; toxic chemicals can leach from the cling film into the meat where there's contact (see CHOICE, February 2010, page 33). Some is in modified-atmosphere packaging or vacuum-packed; we found no obvious quality issues.

Fewer Coles supermarkets have an in-store butchery. In the shops we visited, the meat was all pre-packed, with some vacuum-packed but most in modified-atmosphere packaging. We found lamb loin chops that were far from fresh, with discolouration around the bone and a stale meat smell when the packaging was opened. A vacuum-packed beef rib roast had lost its seal where a bone had pierced the plastic film, increasing the risk of contamination by harmful bacteria.





STORY UTA MIHM & ALAN DOOLEY

## Supercharged surcharges

CHOICE's investigation of credit card surcharges finds they are money for jam for some retailers.

### NUTSHELL

>> Retailers are increasingly imposing surcharges on credit card transactions – and for some, they could be a nice little earner.

>> Surcharges are hard to avoid – in our CHOICE survey, more than one in five participants had paid surcharges more than 10 times in the previous year.

**B**anks have been getting a serve over hidden or punitive fees, but what about retailers who add excessive surcharges to credit card transactions? CHOICE believes some may be doing this not just to cover costs, but to generate an extra revenue stream.

NSW Fair Trading recently approached CHOICE for a joint research project on credit card surcharges. We conducted two surveys: an online survey of 1435 consumers and a diary survey of 140 members who kept a record of their credit card activity, tracking the incidence of surcharges over a two-week period. About 88% of online respondents reported paying a credit card surcharge in the past year; more than 50% paid a surcharge between one and five times, while 22% had paid surcharges more than 10 times in the previous 12 months. Airlines, telcos, travel agents, restaurants, utilities, taxis and petrol stations were identified as industries that commonly impose surcharges (see opposite). The top five companies that respondents recalled surcharging were Telstra, Aldi, Qantas, Virgin Airlines and Caltex.

Our survey also found that surcharges are usually applied as a percentage of the transaction amount – the highest are more than 10%. However, there are some cases of flat fees, such as those imposed by airlines – the highest we found was \$25 per person per booking, charged by Qantas on international bookings. About 64% of respondents had seen surcharges applied by airlines and, particularly when booking online, these fees are hard to avoid.

### Leading the charge

In 2003, new regulations from the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) enabled retailers to introduce surcharges for customers paying with credit and debit cards. This followed reforms to the payments system that disallowed the card schemes' "no-surcharge rule" and caused a reduction behind the scenes in fees paid by merchants for credit card transactions. By 2006, just 7% of merchants were surcharging. But the rate has since increased dramatically, with the percentage of companies surcharging in June this year having risen to between 20% for small merchants and 40% for large merchants.

Surcharges are more likely to be applied to American Express (Amex) transactions because they incur higher costs, and those fees are likely to be higher than surcharges for MasterCard and Visa transactions. The average surcharge for Amex and Diner's Club transactions is 2.7%, whereas for MasterCard and Visa transactions it's 1.7% – on average the surcharge you pay is about 0.8% higher than the average cost the retailers incur.

Anger at the fees is understandable, especially if consumers feel tricked into paying a fee that wasn't adequately disclosed or if no genuine alternative payment option is available. One survey respondent told CHOICE: "A \$44 surcharge! For a one-off purchase ... it felt like the money was for nothing. I could just as easily have used EFTPOS or cash if there had been sufficient warning."



### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO AVOID A SURCHARGE

Here are some tips for getting the best value:

- **Ask how to avoid surcharges**  
Surcharge-less payment methods might include debit card, cash or online payment.
- **Use EFTPOS and other debit cards**  
There's often no surcharge and

fees for the merchant are lower than for credit cards.

- **Report non-disclosure**  
Businesses must ensure that consumers know a fee will apply, and the amount, before the transaction occurs. If this doesn't happen, complain to

the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC).

- **Compare surcharges**  
If you can't avoid the surcharge, choose the card with the lower rate – many merchants charge different amounts for different credit cards.

### Are some retailers taking us for a ride?

"For certain retailers and hotels, excessive surcharging is money for jam," says Jeremy Griffith, Visa's director of corporate relations in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. "A 1.5% surcharge by a hotel, based on the RBA's published average merchant rates, represents a 70% to 80% margin for the merchant."

But the difficulty in determining whether any individual merchant is profiteering is that, apart from the obvious cases, we need to know the merchant service fee (MSF) a retailer pays to its bank for processing credit card transactions.

The RBA publishes average MSFs. As at June 2010, they were:

- MasterCard and Visa: 0.86%
- American Express: 1.93%
- Diners Club: 2.11%

Of course, you can expect large merchants to pay significantly less than the average. And even if an average-size retailer is not similarly blessed, odds are if they are still charging far in excess of the percentages quoted by the RBA, they could be using surcharges as an extra source of revenue. On the other hand, small merchants and those processing relatively low volumes of credit card transactions may pay far in excess of the average MSFs quoted above.

Merchants often impose the same surcharge for all payment cards, even though they have very different costs. For example, a restaurant might be charged a 2% MSF for Amex and 1% for Visa and MasterCard, but it decides to apply an average "blended" surcharge to consumers of 1.5%. Airlines also commonly blend their surcharges, with the high use of corporate and premium cards driving up the costs for everyone (see Airline Credit Card Surcharges, page 32).

### How well are surcharges disclosed?

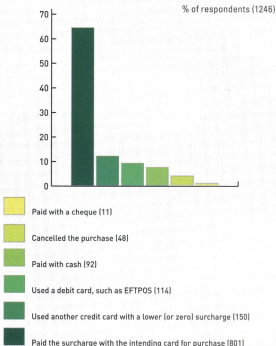
The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) states that when merchants charge their customers a credit card fee, they must ensure consumers know:

- that the credit card fee will apply; and
- the amount of the fee before they enter into the transaction.

"The number one complaint we hear from consumers is that they didn't know there was a surcharge until it was too late," says Amex spokesperson, Luisa Megale.

Some participants in our diary survey said disclosure was inadequate. Respondents reported that in more than 10% of 163 recorded surcharging instances, they did not recall being notified at all. Of those who were notified, one in four felt the method of notification was not prominent enough. Just under one in five of the respondents who had been notified felt the timing >

### What CHOICE members did when faced with surcharges



### NUMBER CRUNCH

## 88%

The percentage of respondents to a CHOICE survey who recalled paying a credit charge surcharge in the past 12 months.

### INDUSTRIES CHARGING CREDIT CARD SURCHARGES

| Industry                            | Survey participants being charged (%) |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Airlines                            | 64                                    |
| Telephone/mobile/internet           | 42                                    |
| Holiday travel                      | 36                                    |
| Restaurant/formal dining            | 32                                    |
| Utilities (electricity, gas, water) | 27                                    |
| Taxis                               | 26                                    |
| Petrol                              | 22                                    |
| Groceries                           | 18                                    |
| Appliances                          | 16                                    |
| Council rates                       | 16                                    |
| Insurance                           | 14                                    |
| Clothing/footwear                   | 12                                    |
| Sporting/entertainment              | 12                                    |
| Takeaway/fast food                  | 8                                     |
| Health/medical care                 | 8                                     |
| Education/childcare                 | 3                                     |

(n = 1204. Source: CHOICE member survey; multiple responses were allowed.)



## DID YOU KNOW?

### Around the airlines

In 2009, CHOICE awarded Qantas a Shonky for its \$7.70/\$25 per booking per passenger credit card surcharges, paid on domestic and international flights respectively. Assuming Qantas pays far below the average merchant service fees of 0.9% (MasterCard and Visa) and 1.9% (Amex), it's probably a nice little earner. The surcharge on small-value bookings is exactly the same as for large-value bookings. And because all cardholders pay the same blended surcharge, those with standard Visa and MasterCard subsidise the cost of Amex cards and the benefits of those with loyalty programs. Qantas (and other airlines) claim their surcharges are transparent and based on overall costs, and that customers can use alternative

payment methods. For their full response, go to [www.choice.com.au/surcharge](http://www.choice.com.au/surcharge).

**Virgin Blue** charges a flat \$3.50 per passenger, per sector, for domestic travel, and \$6 per passenger, per sector, for international; **Tiger** charges \$7.20 per passenger and sector for domestic travel, while **Jetstar** charges \$3.50 per domestic and \$5 per international flight.

**Rex** is the only airline surveyed that applies percentage fees, which vary depending on the card.

Both **Virgin** and **Jetstar** allow consumers to use a new internet payment system called POLi to avoid paying a surcharge. However, consumer awareness and use of the systems is very low and some survey respondents were critical.

< of notification was inadequate. Sometimes this was because disclosure was made after the transaction had gone through. One participant only noticed that Origin Gas charges a 0.6% fee after she had paid – “there’s a small notation on the bill about the surcharge; the fee is added to the next bill”.

Similar problems can arise when disclosure is verbal rather than in writing. One diary respondent found that a 3.5% fee for Amex at a hardware store was disclosed verbally and only as the transaction was being processed.

### What can you do about surcharges?

Some CHOICE members have changed their payment behaviour where possible. When last asked to pay a credit card surcharge, more than one in three survey respondents chose another payment method or cancelled their purchase (see What CHOICE Members Did When Faced With Surcharges, page 31).

Many participants told us they would consider not returning to a business that imposes credit card surcharges. “I don’t pay them as a matter of principle – they (the company) lose my business,” said one survey participant.

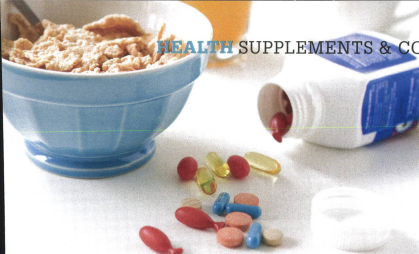
We also asked respondents what they would be most likely to do if presented with a 2% surcharge in a shop or restaurant. Just over one in seven indicated they would pay the fee without question; others said they would “pay once but not return”; while about 60% stated they’d attempt to pay with a method that doesn’t attract a surcharge. About one in five said they would go to another merchant that didn’t apply the surcharge.

For tips on avoiding paying surcharges, see What You Can Do to Avoid a Surcharge, page 30. ■

### AIRLINE CREDIT CARD SURCHARGES

| Airline            | Surcharge (domestic surcharges include GST where applicable)   | How it is applied          | Alternative payment to avoid the surcharge                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Jetstar</b>     | \$3.50 (domestic)<br>\$5 (international)                       | Per flight, per passenger  | Jetstar MasterCard<br>Jetstar Platinum MasterCard<br>Jetstar voucher<br>Direct payment (14 days before flights)<br>Internet banking (POLi) |
| <b>Qantas</b>      | \$7.70 (domestic and trans-Tasman)<br>\$25 (international)     | Per booking, per passenger | BPAY seven days before flights<br>MasterCard debit card                                                                                    |
| <b>Virgin Blue</b> | \$3.50 (domestic)<br>\$6 (international)                       | Per sector, per passenger  | Internet banking (POLi)                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Rex</b>         | 1.76% (Visa/MasterCard)<br>2.86% (Diners Club)<br>3.96% (Amex) | Per booking                | Cash                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Tiger</b>       | \$7.20 (domestic)                                              | Per sector, per passenger  | MasterCard debit card;<br>Tiger voucher                                                                                                    |





## NUTSHELL

>> In a loosely regulated market, there are some complementary medicines that CHOICE believes should not be sold. Conversely, some can be very beneficial.

>> The TGA has taken action on some of the more dangerous supplements, but some are slipping through the net.

STORY KARINA BRAY

## A bitter pill?

Some so-called "health supplements" could in fact be doing you harm. Which should you take and which should you avoid?

**I**f a medication or health supplement is available to buy, it must be safe, right? Not necessarily. When our US sister organisation, Consumers Union, went shopping for supplements identified as the most dangerous (see Top 10 Dangerous Supplements, page 34), they found all of them readily available, either in-store or online. The good news is that most are not widely available for sale in Australia, colloidal silver, kava and bitter orange being the exceptions.

CHOICE is concerned that products considered unsafe are still being manufactured and sold here and overseas. In Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is charged with making sure the complementary medicine products for sale are safe. While some have been banned or restricted (with labelling requirements, dosage specifications or import restrictions), others have slipped through the net or remain unrestricted (see TGA Keeping Watch, page 34).

Even products considered "safe" can be dangerous when taken in combination with certain medications or other herbal supplements or if taken by people with certain conditions. Black cohosh, for example, is taken by millions of women worldwide for relief of menopause symptoms with no evident side effects, yet it has been implicated in cases of serious liver damage, albeit very few.

### Supplements and medicines to beware

- **Colloidal silver** This is permitted for sale in Australia only as a water purifier. However, that hasn't stopped enthusiastic retailing – especially online – of large quantities of this product for therapeutic use. Companies aren't allowed to make therapeutic claims about colloidal silver products because they are not able to be listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG). Many attempt

to circumvent this restriction by pointing out that the TGA forbids them explaining all the alleged benefits of the product, and publishing "testimonials" from customers extolling its virtues. The TGA has taken several such companies to task, but our own research found plenty more flouting the regulations. One company insinuated that the government is in cahoots with pharmaceutical companies to protect the antibiotics industry from this powerful competitor!

- **Kava** is permitted for therapeutic use as an anti-anxiety supplement, provided the maximum daily dose is 250mg of the active constituent, kavalactones. It's also a restricted import; these changes followed a voluntary recall of kava products in 2002 after an Australian fatality due to acute liver failure was reported.
- **Bitter orange** Many weight-loss products contain bitter orange (*Citrus aurantium*). Alarmingly, these products also often contain caffeine and caffeine-like substances, which work with bitter orange to increase its cardiovascular effects. Bitter orange essential oils are also available.
- **Comfrey** has been used as a healing herb for centuries and was known as "knit-bone" for its reputed bone healing properties. It's easy to grow and these days is usually consumed as a tea made from homegrown plants, which can cause liver damage if taken in excessive amounts over long periods. The ointment form is not dangerous.
- **Yohimbine (yohimbe)** is not approved for sale in Australia, and is a restricted import. In 2002, the TGA recalled a weight loss product containing yohimbine that had entered the market without being listed on the ARTG.

### Supplements likely to be helpful

Despite the huge complementary medicines market in Australia – estimated to be worth up to \$3.5 billion annually – most supplements have not been proven to work. The TGA requires companies to hold evidence of the effectiveness of products, but that evidence is rarely audited and products can be sold simply on the basis of historical precedent for use with certain conditions.

The popular supplements listed in the table (see page 34) have been shown to be probably safe for most people and possibly or probably effective in appropriate doses for certain conditions. One problem with the current regulatory system is that products with potentially useful ingredients, such as St John's wort, contain active components that are known to be variable – or are not precisely known at all. So different products supposedly containing the same ingredients at the same dose are unlikely to be equally effective.

You should always talk to your doctor or pharmacist before starting any supplement; also, note that most have not been studied in pregnant or breastfeeding women. The list of interactions and side effects in the table is not all-inclusive. >

## TGA KEEPING WATCH

The TGA is partly funded by the people it's supposed to regulate — companies producing potentially harmful products. It maintains a list of relatively safe complementary medicines, but plenty with no proven benefit are still available. While they may not cause harm, consumers could be wasting their money and bypassing more effective treatment. CHOICE wants a system where a manufacturer could pay to have the effectiveness of their product independently evaluated. If it's proven effective, it would be awarded a Green Tick, similar to the Heart Foundation's Red Tick.

### 10 SUPPLEMENTS LIKELY TO BE HELPFUL

#### Name (alternative names)

**Calcium** (calcium carbonate, calcium citrate, calcium gluconate)

**Cranberry** (American cranberry, large cranberry, cranberry extract)

**Fish oil** (EPA/DHA, long chain omega-3 fatty acids)

**Lactase** (beta-galactosidase)

**Lactobacillus** (acidophilus, probiotics)

**Psyllium** (blond plantago, blonde psyllium)

**Pygeum** (*Prunus africana*, African plum tree, African prune)

**SAME** (ademetonine, adenosylmethionine, S-Adenosyl-L-Methionine, sammy)

**St John's wort** (*Hypericum perforatum*, SJW)

**Vitamin D** (Cholecalciferol, vitamin D3, ergocalciferol, vitamin D2)

#### Efficacy for selected users

Likely to be effective in combination with vitamin D in preventing and treating bone loss and osteoporosis. Taken daily, could reduce some PMS symptoms.

Possibly effective for preventing recurrent urinary tract infections.

Effective for reducing triglyceride levels. Likely to be effective at decreasing the risk of heart attack, stroke and progression of hardening of the arteries in people with existing heart disease.

Probably effective at reducing gastrointestinal symptoms in the lactose intolerant when used before consuming lactose or when added to milk.

Probably effective at preventing diarrhoea while taking antibiotics.

Effective as a bulk laxative for reducing constipation or softening stools. Likely to be effective at lowering cholesterol in people with mild to moderately high cholesterol.

Likely to be effective at reducing symptoms of an enlarged prostate.

Likely to be effective at reducing symptoms of depression, reducing pain and improving functioning in people with osteoarthritis.

Probably effective at improving symptoms of some forms of depression.

Likely to be effective when taken with calcium to help prevent osteoporosis. May help reduce the risk of falls and fractures in people with vitamin D deficiency and bone loss in people taking corticosteroids.

### TOP 10 DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENTS

#### Name (alternative names)

**Aconite** (aconitum, *Radix aconiti*)

#### Purported uses

Inflammation, joint pain, wounds, gout.

**Bitter orange** (*Citrus aurantium*, *Aurantii fructus*, zhi shi)

Weight loss, nasal congestion, allergies, indigestion.

**Chaparral** (creosote bush, *Larrea tridentata*)

Colds, weight loss, infections, inflammation, cancer, detoxification.

**Colloidal silver** (ionic silver, native silver, silver in suspending agent)

Fungal and other infections, Lyme disease, rosacea, psoriasis, food poisoning, chronic fatigue syndrome, HIV/AIDS.

**Comfrey** (blackwort, *Symphytum officinale*, slippery root)

Cough, heavy menstrual periods, chest pain, cancer.

**Germanium** (Ge, *Germanium sesquioxide*, Ge-132, germanium-132)

Pain, infection, glaucoma, liver problems, arthritis, osteoporosis, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, cancer.

**Greater celandine** (*Chelidonium majus*, celandine)

Upset stomach, irritable bowel syndrome, liver disorders, detoxification, cancer.

**Kava** (*Piper methysticum*, kava-kava)

Anxiety (possibly effective).

**Lobelia** (*Lobelia inflata*, asthma weed)

Coughing, bronchitis, asthma, smoking cessation (possibly ineffective).

**Yohimbe** (*Corynanthe yohimbi*, yohimbine, johimbi)

Aphrodisiac, chest pain, diabetic complications, depression; erectile dysfunction (possibly effective).

## Selected potential side effects

Belching, gas. A recent study suggested high-dose calcium supplements may increase the risk of heart disease.

Large amounts can cause stomach upset, diarrhoea.

Bitter aftertaste, upset stomach, nausea, loose stools. High doses can increase levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol in some people or increase the chance of bleeding.

No reported side effects.

Some people with poor immune function should check with their doctor first. Symptoms include stomach pain, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea. Some people can have a serious allergic response that requires immediate medical attention.

Stomach pain, abdominal pain.

Symptoms, dry mouth, headache, mild insomnia, anorexia, sweating, dizziness and nervousness, especially at higher doses. It can make some people with depression feel anxious.

Insomnia, vivid dreams, anxiety, dizziness, headache, skin rash and tingling. Can cause skin to become extra-sensitive to sunlight.

Very large amounts might cause weakness, fatigue, headache and nausea, though side effects are rare.

## Selected drug interactions

Calcium can decrease the effectiveness of certain antibiotics, osteoporosis drugs and thyroid drugs.

May increase the effects of the blood thinner warfarin.

May increase the effect of blood-thinning drugs and high blood-pressure medications.

None known.

May cause infection in people taking immunosuppressant drugs.

May decrease the effectiveness of carbamazepine, an antiseizure drug; digoxin, a heart drug; and lithium, for bipolar disorder. May cause low blood sugar when taken with some diabetes drugs.

None known.

May lead to a toxic reaction when taken with the cough suppressant dextromethorphan, certain antidepressants, or narcotic pain relievers.

May worsen symptoms when taken with the Parkinson's drug levodopa.

May decrease the effectiveness of a wide range of drugs, including birth-control pills, heart medications, HIV/AIDS drugs and warfarin. May also increase the effects or side effects of certain antidepressants.

May reduce the effectiveness of some medications, such as atorvastatin (Lipitor), other heart medications, birth-control pills and HIV/AIDS drugs.

## Other risks

Stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, low blood pressure, respiratory-system problems, heart-rhythm disorders, death.

Stomach pain, heart-rhythm disorders, heart attack, stroke.

Stomach pain, kidney problems.

Stomach pain, skin, mucous membrane discolouration, neurological problems, kidney damage.

Stomach pain, cancer.

Stomach pain, death.

Stomach pain.

Stomach pain.

Stomach pain; overdosage can cause fast heartbeat, low blood pressure, coma, death.

High doses can cause high blood pressure, rapid heart rate; low doses can cause severe low blood pressure, heart problems.

## CHOICE verdict

Unsafe. Commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine, aconite (or aconitum) poisoning has occurred many times in Australia (and overseas). It's a neurotoxin and cardiotoxin, causing arrhythmia and ventricular fibrillation.

Possibly unsafe. Contains a compound synephrine, similar to ephedrine, which is not permitted for sale in Australia. Risks may be higher when taken with supplements that contain caffeine.

Probably unsafe. Requires a warning label.

Probably unsafe. Not permitted to be sold for therapeutic use.

Probably unsafe. Mostly consumed as tea. Ointments are safe.

Probably unsafe. Doesn't appear to be sold in Australia, and is not on the list of ingredients permitted for listing with TGA.

Probably unsafe. Requires a warning label.

Possibly unsafe. Requires warning label. Maximum daily dose is 250mg.

Probably unsafe. Restrictions on concentrations.

Possibly unsafe for use without medical supervision. Not approved by the TGA for sale in Australia and is a restricted import.



STORY TANYA FONG

## Net a bargain

Some of the best discounts can be found online through group-buying websites. CHOICE finds out which ones are worth logging on to.

### NUTSHELL

>> Group buying websites offer one-day-only discounts for a variety of products and services.

>> Always carefully check the terms and conditions of the coupon – not all CHOICE members have had satisfactory experiences.

**I**f you want to bag a bargain (and who doesn't?), forget loyalty cards or waiting for the sale season. Group-buying websites offer daily discount coupons for a variety of services – everything from go-kart sessions and massages to theatre productions and up-market restaurants and bars.

### How do group-buying websites work?

Generally, a group-buying website offers a new deal every day, for one or two days only. The companies operating the sites use the power of group or bulk buying to negotiate big discounts with retailers, and receive a commission for the number of coupons sold online.

When a new offer is published online, it will only be made available if a minimum number of subscribers sign up to buy – if they don't, the deal does not happen. The deal ends when the coupons are sold out or the time limit expires. After you've paid for a coupon, it's emailed to you so you can print and redeem it at the retailer. You can sign up to receive daily offers in your email inbox, Facebook and/or Twitter accounts.

CHOICE member Naomi Nixon believes she's saved about \$400 in beauty and spa services since she first

jumped onto these sites. Another member, Jo Randell, says she's bought a few discount coupons and has had "positive experiences with all of them so far. In fact, I've discovered a new great hairdresser."

Some sites also offer more than one deal a day (see CHOICE Recommended Sites, opposite) and allow you to suggest deals from particular retailers.

### The power of social media

Group-buying website operators rely heavily on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter to drive sales. The size of their subscriber database – the bigger the better – helps the operators negotiate discounts with retailers who may otherwise spend on media advertising. Some websites also give credits to shoppers to encourage them to spread the word to their friends and to encourage purchases.

"Consumers get the chance to try something new at big discounts," says Jon Beres, general manager of Scoopon. "Retailers provide the discounts as they benefit – in a very short time – from pre-paid sales, exposure to their products and services and the chance to build repeat business. It's a win-win situation."

### TIPS FOR USING ONLINE COUPONS

- **Create a separate email account** or dedicated folder when subscribing to group-buying websites to avoid cluttering your regular inbox.
- **If you miss out on an offer in your state from a national retailer, check if it's available in others.** We bought Hoyts movie tickets at half price on the Adelaide Scoopon site to use in Sydney Hoyts cinemas after the offer had expired in Sydney.
- **Search for "coupon", "discount" or "promo code"** and relevant key words if the bargain you're looking for is not explicitly featured on the website (for example, airline tickets and holiday accommodation deals).
- **Check the fine print** for snags such as expiry dates and compulsory advance booking requirements.
- **Visit [www.entertainmentbook.com.au](http://www.entertainmentbook.com.au),** a local restaurant and activity guide that costs \$50-\$65 per year and offers up to 50% off restaurants, entertainment outlets and hotels throughout Australia and

New Zealand. A charity fundraiser, Entertainment Book's discounts are only available through fundraising organisations.

- **Look for sites offering discount coupons** that don't require you to sign up to a website or buy vouchers, such as [www.hotdockets.com.au](http://www.hotdockets.com.au) and [www.offerme.com.au](http://www.offerme.com.au).
- **Be quick to make a booking for your coupon service** or be prepared to wait, especially when dealing with small or medium businesses.

## Can you be sure the bargains are genuine?

MySkin Laser Clinic in Melbourne offered a deal through Scoopon whereby \$79 bought a voucher for laser hair removal deals to the value of \$500 – an 84% discount. More than a thousand people bought the vouchers, locking in three months' worth of business for the clinic.

Clinic director, Chris Ohanian, says, "We publish a list of the usual prices for the different types of treatment, so that voucher-buyers are clear about the value they are getting." Says CHOICE member, Marta Pearce: "Given that a lot of the coupons are for services rather than products, it's not really possible to know whether their claim of original value is correct – but that's fine by me, as long as I'm happy with the price I'm paying."

## Too good to be true?

Group-buying websites certainly offer great bargains – but as always, there are snags to watch out for. "Consumers should be mindful that the discount might be an exaggeration, and should check the terms and conditions attached," says Christopher Zinn, CHOICE Director of Communications and Campaigns. "For example, call and check with the restaurant offering vouchers whether it's a set menu."

CHOICE member Jon Park, who bought six coupons for go-karting, was miffed when he could not use them on the day he wanted. "I was told by the go-kart operator that voucher-holders weren't given priority over full-paying customers and that we would have to call the day before to see if a time was available on the day. This wasn't stated as part of the terms and conditions of purchase. I believe this is very unfair and unjust."

Another member, Dave Gardner, warns: "I purchased a voucher from Spreets for two dozen cupcakes from Kustom Cupcakes, with a special occasion in mind. The voucher's terms and conditions stated that I needed to pre-order the cupcakes with 24 hours' notice, which I did. But Kustom Cupcakes then came back and said they were fully booked that weekend and couldn't accept my order. I explained that the cupcakes weren't useful to me any other time, but to no avail."

(Spreets chief executive officer, Dean McEvoy, told CHOICE: "We will facilitate a refund directly from the business to the consumer and, if they aren't co-operative, we'll refund the consumer and chase the business for the money. Most of the time it's a misunderstanding or the business is inundated in the first days after a deal sells.")

Another drawback of group-buying websites is that while many offers are available in the major Australian cities, most are concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Salespeople at the business for which you buy a coupon may also be pushy in upselling other products and packages. ■

## CHOICE RECOMMENDED SITES

**ALLTHEDEALS.COM.AU** is a daily and weekly deals tracker for a range of services and products. A very useful site to bookmark.

**CUDO.COM.AU** is a joint venture between Microsoft and Australian media company PBL. It hasn't been around as long as similar sites, but the deals hosted are solid bargains, such as \$69 for gold tickets to the Ben Hur live show in Sydney (originally priced at \$159) and a \$20 voucher for \$60 worth of food at an Italian restaurant in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

**JUMPNIT.COM.AU** Encompassing everything from accommodation deals to beauty treatments, this site offers some generous discounts. In October, it hosted a \$149 coupon for two nights' accommodation, breakfast, massage and facial at a hotel in the Blue Mountains (package originally priced at \$450). Jump On It is also extending its reach to Auckland and Johannesburg, so if you're thinking of heading to those destinations, check this site for more details.

**OUFFER.COM.AU** offers a discussion forum where shoppers can post questions and receive answers about the vouchers they've bought on the site, as well as provide feedback about their experiences – positive and negative. Shoppers are also able to use the forum to sell their vouchers. Its diverse offers include discounts for restaurants, beauty salons and cleaning services.

**OURDEAL.COM.AU** has an even spread of deals, from fitness and restaurants to paintball, scuba diving and spa packages, with at least 50% slashed off the usual prices. The site also offers up to three additional or side offers per day.

**SCOOPON.COM.AU** is a spinoff from local product bargain site Catch of the Day, and with half a million subscribers has the largest database among the group-buying websites. It has offered some very good deals, including \$2 burgers and a buffet with unlimited beer, wine and soft drinks onboard a harbour cruiser for \$50 (original price \$110). The site also has a free iPhone App you can download to access Scoopon.

**SPREETS.COM.AU** offers lots of premium beauty and spa deals as well as bargains such as more than 50% discount on tickets to the musical, *Fame*, in Sydney, and for \$55 (original price \$110), a five-hour fishing trip in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria.

Group-buying website operators rely heavily on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter to drive sales





STORY SUZIE BROWN

# Bagging a green solution

Biodegradable, paper or reusable – which shopping bag is truly the most sustainable?

## NUTSHELL

>> Consumption of single-use plastic bags appears to be on the increase again.  
>> Australia is lagging behind the many nations that have banned single-use plastic bags.  
>> Some state governments, towns and retailers have led the way in banning single-use bags.

**G**reen has become the new black when it comes to shopping bags. Ever since supermarkets introduced the now-ubiquitous green bags in 2002, reusable bags have become part of Australian life – a recent CHOICE online reader survey found 62% of respondents use green bags or other reusable bags as their main shopping bag. Coles reports that green bags are the most popular reusable bag in its supermarkets, with sales growing at about 20% per year.

Yet despite efforts by retailers to promote reusable bags, consumption of single-use high-density polyethylene (HDPE) plastic bags may be creeping up again. John Dee, director of advocacy group Do Something, claims Australians are still using more than six billion bags per year. Despite calls from environmental and community groups to ban or tax lightweight plastic bags, federal and some state governments have been hesitant to introduce a levy, such as that in Ireland, or to ban them outright.

## Australia lags behind

As well as Ireland, many other nations have introduced measures to reduce plastic bag use. The largest is China, which banned the production, distribution and use of lightweight HDPE plastic bags in 2008, a move estimated to have saved the equivalent of three million metric tonnes of oil each year.

In 2002, Bangladesh banned lightweight plastic bags in response to massive litter problems, such as blocked drains, which caused havoc during their regular flooding. Taiwan also banned single-use plastic bags in 2001. In Europe, Denmark and Belgium have placed a tax on retailers' use of plastic bags, while France is phasing in a ban on non-degradable plastic bags. Retailers in Germany, Sweden, Spain and Norway have long charged customers a fee for plastic bags. Italy has had a tax on plastic bags since 1989; in Wales, a levy will come into force in 2011, while Israel has had a levy since 2008.

## States go it alone

In May 2009, the **South Australian** government introduced a ban on the use of single-use plastic bags. Retailers in that state are now only allowed to offer biodegradable plastic bags, paper

## PLASTIC BAGS – STATE OF PLAY

### STATES/TERRITORIES

|                            |                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SA</b>                  | Lightweight HDPE plastic bags banned since 2009. Reusable bags, heavy duty plastic, biodegradable and paper bags allowed. |
| <b>ACT</b>                 | Ban on lightweight HDPE plastic bags from July 2011. Likely to be similar to SA.                                          |
| <b>NT</b>                  | A ban similar to SA from June 2011.                                                                                       |
| <b>Tasmania</b>            | Likely to bring in a ban in 2011.                                                                                         |
| <b>Victoria</b>            | Trialled a charge for plastic bags in 2008, but unwilling to roll it out across the state or implement a ban.             |
| <b>NSW, Queensland, WA</b> | Not considering a ban or levy.                                                                                            |

### SOME TOWNS AND SUBURBS THAT HAVE BANNED PLASTIC BAGS (BY STATE/TERRITORY)

|                 |                                                                          |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Tasmania</b> | Coles Bay.                                                               |
| <b>Victoria</b> | Birregurra; Cannons Creek; Murtoa; Metung; Timboon; Cohuna; Leitchville. |
| <b>NSW</b>      | Kangaroo Valley; Huskisson; Oyster Bay; Mogo; Orient Point.              |
| <b>NT</b>       | Milikapati; Wadeye; Lajamanu; Yulara.                                    |

### RETAILERS THAT HAVE PHASED OUT PLASTIC BAGS

|                       |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bunnings</b>       | No plastic bags since 2008; only reusable bags for sale.                            |
| <b>Ikea</b>           | No plastic bags since 2004; only reusable bags for sale.                            |
| <b>Aldi</b>           | Have never offered plastic bags since opening in Australia; reusable bags for sale. |
| <b>Target</b>         | No plastic bags since mid-2009; biodegradable and reusable bags for sale.           |
| <b>Australia Post</b> | No plastic bags since mid-2009; reusable bags for sale.                             |

bags or heavy-duty reusable bags, either free or for a charge. (Produce and meat container bags, and purchased bin liners, are exempt from the ban.) South Australians have taken to reusable bags with gusto, with 90% of residents surveyed in 2009 taking their own bags to the supermarket and only one percent relying entirely on shop-provided bags.

Both the **Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory** (ACT) governments will ban lightweight plastic bags from mid-2011. It is also likely that **Tasmania** will introduce a ban in 2011. Unfortunately, the Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales governments have not shown any interest in introducing a ban on plastic bags, despite support from shoppers for such a move.

### Community and retailer responses

Some communities have taken the initiative and banned lightweight plastic bags in their town (see table, left). Across Australia, many festivals and events, farmers' markets and entertainment precincts have gone plastic bag-free as communities have shown a willingness to embrace alternatives to the single-use plastic bag.

Similarly, retailers have been proactive in this area.

In 2003, Bunnings introduced a 10c charge per plastic bag, which resulted in a 99% reduction in usage over five years. In 2008, it removed plastic bags from its outlets altogether, with reusable bags and cardboard boxes proving popular replacements. Target also phased out plastic bags in 2009, charging customers for biodegradable or reusable bags instead and saving 100 million plastic bags per year.

By far the most plastic bags are consumed in supermarkets (see Number Crunch, right), yet neither of Australia's two major chains advocates any limits. "We don't support a ban on bags, nor a levy, because we think it would inconvenience our customers," says Jim Cooper from Coles. Interestingly, however, all supermarket chains in SA have complied with the ban on HDPE single-use bags without a hitch.

By contrast, Aldi has only ever offered reusable green and heavy-duty plastic bags, available for its customers to purchase, since opening in Australia in 2001. Spokesperson Stefan Kopp says Aldi customers quickly got used to the arrangement, and most bring their own bags to the store.

### Which bag is best for the environment?

Peter Allan, principal consultant at Hyder Consulting, has authored numerous studies for the government on the impacts of plastic bags, including reports about which shopping bag would be kindest to the environment. This research involved a life-cycle assessment of bag options, including energy and water use, materials consumption and litter and marine impacts across the life of a bag. The analysis found that, overall, a reusable bag is a better option for the environment than bags with only one to three uses.

"Given the popularity of the green bags, we needed to test whether reusable was better for the environment and this was comprehensively proven – but only so long as you use it repeatedly over a long period," says Allan. The company's research shows that a green bag has to be used more than 23 times before it becomes a better option for the environment than single-use bags.

Of the range of reusable bag types tested, the most environmentally friendly option was the 100% recycled-content PET reusable bag, closely followed by the reusable green bag. Calico bags were not recommended, due to the amount of water used in their production. An assessment of single-use bags was also undertaken and the recycled HDPE bags came out best, with paper and biodegradable starch bags the least preferable for the environment. "Both biodegradable and paper bags use more energy and materials to make than thin plastic bags," says Allan. "And there is little advantage in biodegradable and degradable bags (see Jargon Buster, left), because most end up in landfill where there is no benefit to breaking down – they just create more methane and a less-stable landfill site."

### CHOICE VERDICT

Given that the SA, ACT and NT bag bans allow retailers to offer biodegradable and paper bags, Allan's research suggests that switching to these options on a large scale could result in worse environmental outcomes. While the reusable bag is clearly preferable for the environment, Allan is concerned about the proliferation of these bags resulting from giveaways at shops and events, not to mention repeat purchases every time a customer forgets to bring along their own bag.

Reflecting on Australia's response to the issue over the past decade, however, Allan believes we've come a long way. "You used to get grief if you brought your own bag to the supermarket, but now it's seen as perfectly acceptable, if not preferable. In SA, there are now a lot of no-bag transactions where people realise they don't need a bag at all." ■

## NUMBER CRUNCH

### 7000

The number of bags per minute Australians throw away.

### 429,000

The number of supermarket bags dumped into landfill every hour.

### 75%

The percentage of the 3.9 billion bags used in Australia in 2007 that came from supermarkets.

### JARGON BUSTER

**Biodegradable** Plastic that meets the Australian Standard for biodegradability, which means it breaks down or composts into carbon dioxide, methane, biomass and water. Generally made of corn starch or other plant material.

**Degradable** Petroleum-based plastic that breaks down into small pieces when exposed to oxygen or sunlight.

**HDPE – high-density polyethylene** A lightweight plastic from which most single-use plastic bags are made.

**LDPE – low-density polyethylene** Thicker plastic, from which boutique bags are made.



STORY EMILY MCCLUSKEY

## Crack the truth about nuts

CHOICE nuts out the most nutritious mixed nuts to share with friends and family this Christmas.

### NUTSHELL

>> Nuts can help prevent heart disease and even help with weight control.  
>> Packets of mixed nuts come in a variety of combinations – and some are healthier than others.  
>> Eat a variety of nuts to get all the health benefits they offer.

**T**he days of demonising nuts for their high fat and kilojoule content are over. Research shows that nuts are full of important nutrients that can play a role in protecting cardiovascular health and keeping waistlines trim. Nuts may even help control blood glucose levels in diabetics and non-diabetics.

Nuts could also be the power food of the future in tackling cardiovascular disease (CVD), which claims a life in Australia almost every 11 minutes. Risk factors for CVD include high cholesterol, diabetes and being overweight or obese – and nuts can have a positive impact on all these. There is significant evidence showing they can help lower cholesterol levels and improve vascular elasticity (stop hardening of blood vessels). Studies also show that including nuts in a meal may reduce the rise in blood glucose levels after you've eaten.

A review of evidence conducted by industry nutrition organisation Nuts for Life suggests that eating a 30g-50g serve of nuts five times a week is enough to reduce your risk of heart disease by up to 50%, lower total cholesterol levels by 10% and the risk of diabetes by 27%. Nuts have also been linked to a lower body mass index (BMI); despite their high energy and fat content, nuts have an amazing power of satiety and our bodies don't absorb all the fat they contain (some is excreted as waste instead).

CHOICE looked on supermarket shelves and in health food stores to see which unsalted mixed nuts provide the best variety for money (see table, below). Our recommended pack (see opposite), while not the cheapest, contains a nutritious variety of nuts for a reasonable price.

| MIXED NUTS COMPARED                                           | NUT COMPOSITION |             |             |                 |            |             |               |                |                | COSTS               |                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                                                               | Peanuts (%)     | Almonds (%) | Cashews (%) | Brazil nuts (%) | Pecans (%) | Walnuts (%) | Hazelnuts (%) | Pistachios (%) | Macadamias (%) | Price per bag (\$)* | Price per 100g (\$) |
| <b>Brand / product (in order of price per 100g)</b>           |                 |             |             |                 |            |             |               |                |                |                     |                     |
| <b>Yummy Fruit &amp; Nut</b> Unsalted Mixed Nuts (500g)       | 81              | 4           | 6           | 6               | -          | 4           | 1             | -              | -              | 5.99                | 1.20                |
| <b>Coles</b> Unsalted Mixed Nuts with Green Pistachios (375g) | 49              | 14          | 13          | -               | -          | -           | 7             | 8              | 9              | 5.09                | 1.36                |
| <b>Lucky Smart Snax</b> Omega 3 Mega Nut Mix (250g)           | 34              | 27          | -           | -               | 9          | 14          | 11            | 5              | -              | 4.99                | 2.00                |
| <b>Lucky Smart Snax</b> Omega 3 Four Nut Mix (250g)           | -               | 26          | 16          | 31              | -          | 21          | -             | -              | -              | 4.99                | 2.00                |
| <b>Sunsol</b> Natural Mixed Nuts (200g)                       | 32              | 23          | 10          | 11              | -          | 12          | 12            | -              | -              | 4.49                | 2.25                |
| <b>Woolworths</b> Nայtura Natural Nut Mix (250g)              | 15              | 28          | 17          | 11              | 10         | 7           | -             | -              | -              | 5.86                | 2.34                |
| <b>Macro Wholefoods Market</b> Roasted Mixed Nuts (500g)      | -               | 27          | 33          | 18              | 12         | 9           | -             | -              | -              | 11.99               | 2.40                |
| <b>Santos</b> Natural Mixed Nuts (150g)                       | 21              | 22          | 22          | 16              | -          | 8           | 0*            | -              | 11             | 3.99                | 2.66                |
| <b>Santos</b> Unsalted Mixed Nuts (150g)                      | 39              | 39          | 29          | 16              | -          | 6           | -             | -              | -              | 4.09                | 2.73                |
| <b>NuVit</b> Protein Nut Mix (200g)                           | -               | 35          | 30          | 34              | -          | -           | -             | -              | -              | 5.89                | 2.95                |
| <b>Coles</b> Raw Nut Deluxe (175g)                            | -               | 23          | 6           | 21              | -          | 30          | 20            | -              | -              | 5.29                | 3.02                |
| <b>SF Health Foods</b> Premium Mixed Nuts Roasted (250g)      | -               | 31          | 30          | 26              | -          | 12          | 1             | -              | -              | 8.45                | 3.38                |

**USING THE TABLE** We bought three of each pack of unsalted nuts from the same batch, then separated the different nuts and weighed to determine proportions of each nut. Mixed nuts are different sizes and shapes, which means there's likely to be batch-to-batch variation. **TABLE NOTES** Price per bag refers to the price paid on day of purchase in July 2010. \* Product ingredients claimed to contain hazelnuts, but these were not found in any of the three packs.



**CHOICE  
ONLINE**

To find out more about what to look for when buying nuts, log on to [www.choice.com.au/mixednuts](http://www.choice.com.au/mixednuts)

## Which nut provides which benefit?

While there is no such thing as an unhealthy nut, no two nuts are equal in nutritional composition. "Health professionals recommend consuming a mix of nuts, especially almonds and walnuts, as part of a healthy diet," says Lisa Yates, program manager and dietitian for Nuts for Life. Almonds and walnuts get this special mention as almonds tend to have high levels of nutrients across the board and walnuts are high in the omega-3 ALA (alpha linolenic acid) (see below).

**HEALTHY FATS** Nuts are a rich source of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats, which help control cholesterol. **Macadamia nuts** are highest in monounsaturated fats, which promote "good" cholesterol. **Walnuts** are the richest plant-based source of the omega-3 ALA, containing 100% of the adequate intake for women and 63% for men in just 13g (about five walnuts). Omega-3 can reduce the risk of heart disease.

**PROTEIN** Nuts are a good source of protein, which can help control appetite. Nuts also provide the amino acid arginine, which the body turns into nitric oxide, causing blood vessels to dilate and remain elastic. **Almonds** contain the highest amount of arginine and provide the second-highest amount of protein after **pistachios**.

**FIBRE** keeps you regular and can reduce cholesterol levels by preventing re-absorption in the gut. It also helps you feel fuller for longer. **Hazelnuts** contain the most fibre (10.4g/100g), followed by **pistachios** (9g/100g) and **almonds** (8.8g/100g).

**MINERALS** Nuts provide a good hit of essential minerals, including magnesium, copper, zinc, selenium and potassium – all of which can play a role in protecting your heart. Magnesium also has protective properties against diabetes, high blood pressure and CVD – all factors in metabolic syndrome. **Brazil nuts** are highest in magnesium and selenium (an antioxidant); cashews are highest in zinc and copper, and **pistachios** are highest in potassium (which can help control blood pressure).

**VITAMIN E** is a tocopherol – an antioxidant that can stop cholesterol from sticking to artery walls, which can lead to atherosclerosis, the leading cause of heart attack and stroke. **Almonds** are the nut highest in vitamin E by far.

**PLANT STEROLS** Nuts contain plant sterols, which have been proven to reduce cholesterol absorption. **Pistachios** contain the highest amount of plant sterols, followed by **almonds** and **pine nuts**.

## Supermarket or health food store?

The two most expensive mixed nut packets we looked at came from a health food store and the health food aisle of a Coles supermarket. Look beyond supermarket health food sections, as both Coles and Woolworths stock them almost entirely with house brands (you'll also find them in up to four other aisles). Coles' Raw Nut Deluxe will set you back about \$3 per 100g – a dollar more than our recommended packet. ■



## FAT IS STILL FAT

You may be happy to learn you won't absorb all of the fat in nuts, but don't nibble your way through a whole pack just yet. While nuts are full of vitamins and "good-for-you" fats, fat is the most energy-dense nutrient, providing 37kJ per gram (by contrast, carbohydrate provides 16kJ per gram). Even if you don't absorb all this energy, you're still going to get a big kilojoule hit. A handful of nuts a day (about 30g, or 26 almonds) as part of a healthy diet will provide the health benefits without expanding your waistline.



## WHY NO

### SALTED NUTS?

Although we excluded salted varieties of nuts from our review, they dominate the market, often chosen for flavour. But the salt in these products offsets some of the heart health benefits derived from the nuts themselves. A high salt diet is strongly linked with increased blood pressure and hypertension – a risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Some brands of salted nuts contain as much as 780mg of sodium per 100g, a far cry from what is considered low salt (less than 120mg sodium per 100g). If you're interested in salted nut varieties, check the back of the pack, aim for less than 400mg per 100g and limit your intake.

## WHAT TO BUY

### Lucky Smart Snax Omega-3 Four Nut Mix



This pack contains a nutritious variety of nuts for a reasonable price.

## WHERE ARE THE PEANUTS?

Peanuts are not nuts at all, but belong in the legume family with beans and peas. Unlike "real" nuts, which grow on trees, peanuts grow under the ground. Yet they look like and have a nutritional composition akin to tree nuts – and they're cheaper, too, so they dominate the budget mixed nut varieties. Peanuts have a bad reputation for being high in fat and bad for health, but this is mainly due to our appetite for the roasted and salted variety. As a raw product, peanuts are high in protein and fibre and contain heart-healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat, vitamin E, magnesium and niacin.

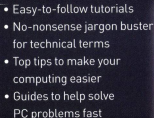


COMING UP IN THE JANUARY ISSUE:

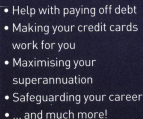
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# Lab tests

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.

**BARBECUES  
PAGE 48**



Fiona Mair cooks steak on a four-burner barbecue in the CHOICE labs.

## Inside

**44 eBook readers**



**52 Portable media players**



## Plus

**54 Camcorders**

**58 Compact cameras**

**62 Car GPS**

**66 Kitchen utensils**

**69 Refrigerators**

## CHOICE. The people's watchdog.

**CHOICE** has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

**CHOICE SHOPPER** For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

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**BEST  
BUY**

**GREEN  
BUY**

## NUTSHELL

>> Manufacturers are jumping on board to release eBook readers in time for the Christmas rush.  
>> Apple's iPad comes second as an eBook reader to one of Sony's latest models in this round of testing.

STORY REBECCA GATTO

# The world of digital reading

The most popular eBook readers are now serious competitors to paperback novels.

Rather than cramming a few paperbacks into your suitcase, you can now carry thousands of electronic books in one handheld device. Increasing competition in the eBook reader market means manufacturers are making rapid improvements to their products in time for Christmas.

CHOICE tested 15 of the latest eBook readers and found usability sets the best apart from the rest. Our What to Buy models (see opposite) are easy and intuitive to use, and are well designed to provide an overall enjoyable reading experience.

## What's new?

In this test, the Pioneer, Laser, Apple and Stash have backlit colour screens that illuminate the LCD from the front or side of the display panel and increase readability in low-light conditions. This uses more power, however, thereby compromising battery life. By comparison, all other models on test display greyscale graphics using E Ink and have much longer battery life, as power is only used when a page is turned.

E Ink-based eBooks are ideal for travelling; their battery can last for weeks without needing to be recharged. Their screens also mimic traditional paperbacks more closely and give a better experience when you're reading indoors or outdoors in direct light.

If you do most of your reading at night, you may think a backlit eBook reader would be a better option; however, only the iPad stands out as being very good for night reading. Eye fatigue is more of an issue with backlit readers; for an E Ink reader, you can buy a clip-on light, such as those from Amazon, for about \$15. >

## HOW WE TEST

Our testing focuses on **design** and **ease of use**, including an ease-of-use assessment by our expert tester, Ryan Shaw, as well as a readability assessment by a user panel of male and female readers aged from 12 onward.

Our trialists assess the feel of each model when reading a digital book compared with reading a paper-based novel. Ease of navigation, turning a page and skipping to particular parts of the eBook are commented on and scored. Each user assesses each eBook reader under three types of lighting: normal indoor, outdoor and bedroom night-time lighting.



## WHAT TO BUY

**81%** Sony PRS-65-/rc  
Touch Edition**PRICE \$299**

This newly released Sony has an interactive touchscreen that is easy to navigate using either your finger or the stylus. Because you can write and save notes on it, it's a useful tool for students. It was the clear favourite in our test for outdoor lighting and also ranked highly for indoor lighting. Its bedroom lighting performance is only OK, but for \$59 you can buy a protective cover (which we recommend for all eBook readers) that incorporates a light with adjustable brightness. Content can be transferred at no cost, and lending books to another user is simple – simply attach the eBook reader to a computer via USB cable and transfer the book. You can also do this via SD card.

Books can be bought from [www.ebookstore.sony.com](http://www.ebookstore.sony.com). Because it supports EPUB, bookstore websites such as Angus & Robertson and Borders can be used to access more books. The book first needs to be downloaded to a computer and then transferred to the Sony Touch via USB cable or SD card. Wi-Fi is not supported in this model.

**76%** Sony PRS-350/sw  
Pocket Edition**PRICE \$229**

The latest release by Sony to the Australian market has a 5" (12.7cm) interactive touchscreen that is easy and intuitive to navigate using your finger or the provided stylus. It performed well for indoor and outdoor lighting due to the E Ink-based screen.

This pocket edition doesn't support audio formats, has only 2GB of internal storage capacity and no removable storage. Without an SD card slot, lending and buying books can only be carried out by connecting the reader to a computer via USB cable. Wi-Fi is not supported, so you cannot buy books wirelessly.

**78%** Apple iPad 32GB  
Wi-Fi + 3G**PRICE \$928**

The iBooks app is available as a free download from the app store. Initially, users could only access old out-of-copyright books, however Apple has now opened the iBooks store to the Australian market, offering a range of new-release paid-for titles that can be downloaded directly to the full-colour iPad. Other eBook apps such as Amazon Kindle, Kobo and Stanza can be used too.

The iBooks app is easy to use and supports zoomable fonts, different font styles and bookmarks that are easy to create and find. While you can transfer content at no cost, iTunes software is required. Books can be lent via the official Nook (Barnes & Noble) app, however the book can only be lent once, for 14 days only. Once 3G or Wi-Fi is turned on, it's very simple to download free books.

The iPad has a 9.7" (24.6cm) screen like the Amazon Kindle DX and is much heavier than dedicated eBook readers. It's by far the best for bedroom lighting due to its backlit screen, yet while it scores well for indoor and outdoor lighting, its screen is very reflective, which can be a nuisance. Its battery lasts 10 hours.

**73%** Amazon Kindle  
3G + Wi-Fi**PRICE \$189**

This model is also available for \$139 with Wi-Fi only as the Kindle Wi-Fi D00901. There are no zoomable fonts for Adobe PDF documents; you can only zoom in on the page instead. There is also no index that lists the bookmarks created, so you need to select the book first and then locate the bookmark. Its integrated microphone allows you to make audio notes that can be linked to a page or passage of text. This Kindle ranked well for indoor and outdoor lighting, and for \$60 you can buy a cover with integrated light to use in dim conditions.

The interface can be confusing if you haven't had any experience with Kindles. No software is required, so transferring content is simple; however, EPUBs are still not supported on the device without the use of conversion software. Once Wi-Fi is turned on, users can browse and buy dedicated content from the Amazon store (not all content on Amazon is available for Australian users). Owners of the 3G + Wi-Fi can buy books wherever 3G connectivity is available; this isn't an option for Wi-Fi D00901 owners.

Amazon has announced plans to allow users to lend content to other Kindle owners. Eligible books can only be lent once for up to 14 days and the lender cannot read the book while it's on loan.



For a jargon buster and more information on eBook availability, see [www.choice.com.au/ebooks](http://www.choice.com.au/ebooks).

**BEST  
BUY**

Hold an eBook reader as though it were a book and see if the buttons feel like they're in the right place for you

## ABOUT THE REST

Our panel praised the large screen on the **Amazon Kindle DX** for the amount of text it can accommodate, but said its size can make it awkward to hold and carry around. It still lacks EPUB file support, so can't access titles that use that format without the use of conversion software.

The **iRiver Story** has a similar interface to the Kindle; however, a dedicated content service is not available. Its many buttons can be daunting, but it's quite intuitive after you've used it for a while.

Book titles can be downloaded from Borders for the **Kobo** e-reader. Its non-slip backing makes it comfortable to hold with one hand.

Our tester and user panel said it's not immediately apparent which controls on the **BeBook Neo** to use. When using the stylus it's much easier to navigate, but the touchscreen is only enabled once the stylus is removed from its housing. Books can be downloaded and bought via different stores such as Dymocks, the Co-op bookshop and Fishpond ebooks. It also has a physical wireless switch to activate Wi-Fi.

The **BeBook Mini** easily fits in your pocket, but the interface and on-screen menu is not as intuitive as other models on test.

The controls on the **Pioneer DreamBook** are not intuitive and the

labelling wears off with continual use. No software is required to transfer content and Wi-Fi is not available, so books must be bought via computer, then transferred via USB or micro SD card. The same applies to the **Laser**.

The **ECO Reader** isn't intuitive to use but comes preloaded with book titles and a leather case.

Users commented on the **Stash's** poor screen contrast, and even after making adjustments saw minimal improvement.

The included protective casing is the **Havnon's** best feature; this eBook reader is the worst for ease of use, as the controls don't allow for quick navigation.

| PRODUCT                                            | PERFORMANCE       |                       |    |                                                |                                                 |                                                           |                     | FEATURES                   |             |                      |                |                 |                   |          |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|----|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------|
|                                                    | Overall score (%) | Ease of use score (%) |    | Readability – normal indoor lighting score (%) | Readability – normal outdoor lighting score (%) | Readability – normal bedroom night score (%)              | Stated battery life | Stated recharge time (hrs) | Touchscreen | Multiple font styles | Text-to-speech | Included stylus | Physical keyboard | Wireless |
| Brand / model (in rank order)                      |                   |                       |    |                                                |                                                 |                                                           |                     |                            |             |                      |                |                 |                   |          |
| Sony PRS-650-/rc Touch Edition                     | 81                | 91                    | 82 | 77                                             | 63                                              | 10,000 page turns                                         |                     | 3                          | ✓           |                      |                | ✓               |                   |          |
| Apple iPad 32GB WiFi + 3G                          | 78                | 73                    | 84 | 72                                             | 86                                              | 10 hours                                                  |                     | ns                         | ✓           | ✓                    | ✓              |                 |                   | ✓        |
| Sony PRS-350/sw Pocket Edition                     | 76                | 88                    | 74 | 72                                             | 56                                              | 10,000 page turns                                         |                     | 3                          | ✓           |                      |                | ✓               |                   |          |
| Amazon Kindle 3G & Wi-Fi / Kindle Wi-Fi D00901 (A) | 73                | 76                    | 75 | 72                                             | 66                                              | 1 month (WiFi off), 10 days (WiFi on) / 3 weeks (WiFi on) |                     | 4.5                        |             |                      | ✓              |                 | ✓                 | ✓        |
| Amazon Kindle DX                                   | 71                | 75                    | 78 | 67                                             | 59                                              | 1 week (WiFi on), 2 weeks (WiFi off)                      |                     | 4                          |             |                      | ✓              |                 | ✓                 | (C)      |
| iRiver Story                                       | 71                | 90                    | 66 | 61                                             | 50                                              | 28hrs reading, 24hrs music, 5hrs voice recording          |                     | 5                          |             |                      |                |                 | ✓                 |          |
| #Kobo Ereader                                      | 70                | 75                    | 72 | 72                                             | 56                                              | 8000 page turns                                           |                     | 3                          |             | ✓                    |                |                 |                   | (E)      |
| #BeBook Neo                                        | 69                | 83                    | 66 | 63                                             | 52                                              | 8000 page turns                                           |                     | 3                          | ✓           | ✓                    |                | ✓               |                   | ✓        |
| #Pioneer DreamBook Colour Ebook Player W95         | 68                | 74                    | 64 | 59                                             | 67                                              | 8 hours                                                   |                     | 5                          |             | ✓                    | ✓              |                 |                   |          |
| ECO Reader                                         | 66                | 86                    | 55 | 55                                             | 48                                              | 7000 page turns or 5hrs MP3 playback                      |                     | 3                          |             | ✓                    |                |                 |                   |          |
| BeBook Mini                                        | 65                | 86                    | 52 | 57                                             | 46                                              | 7000 page turns or 5hrs MP3 playback                      |                     | 3                          |             | ✓                    | ✓              |                 |                   |          |
| #Stash W950                                        | 62                | 72                    | 56 | 50                                             | 60                                              | 7 hours                                                   |                     | 4                          |             |                      |                |                 |                   |          |
| #Havnon Ebook Reader N516                          | 58                | 64                    | 56 | 59                                             | 49                                              | 8000 page turns                                           |                     | 4 (B)                      |             |                      | ✓              |                 |                   |          |
| #Laser EB101                                       | 58                | 74                    | 48 | 43                                             | 53                                              | 8 hours                                                   |                     | 5                          |             | ✓                    |                |                 |                   |          |

**USING THE TABLE SCORES** The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 40%, Readability – Normal indoor lighting: 20%, Normal outdoor lighting: 20%, Multiple font type allows you to alter the typeface. **Text-to-speech** is available on some of the models on test, but the effect is disconcerting and generally useless unless you can cope with listening to a story read by a robot. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2010. **TABLE NOTES** All eBook readers by default ship with an electronic version of the manual available on the device. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. **#** Newly tested model.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Accessories** Does the reader come with a wall charger or only a USB cable? In Australia, the Kindle comes with an AC adapter but most USB/AC adapters may not work with it.

**Controls** Note where the page-turning buttons are located, as this has a big impact on long-term comfort. Hold the reader as if you were reading a book and see if the buttons are in the right place for you. Spend some time going through the menus to see how easy it is to access the reader's electronic features.

**Connectivity** Does it connect to a PC only via USB? Does it have internet connectivity via Wi-Fi or 3G? Some readers can connect to the internet

wirelessly to download books. Some also have 3G capability, allowing you to download books wherever you are (as long as 3G is available).

**Document file formats** Check eBook stores to see what format the books you want come in (the most common is EPUB). Also check if they are locked with digital rights management (DRM). Compare this with the eBook reader's specifications for compatibility. Note: some may list a format but only support this format without DRM, so look for a listing of the DRM-locked formats it does support. Another popular eBook format is Adobe PDF; however, while this format is good for keeping the

look and style consistent, resizing the font on an Adobe eBook can be difficult or impossible.

**Memory capacity** All eBook readers on test except the Kindles, Sony 350 and iPad have SD memory card slots that allow you to read as many eBooks as the card can store.

**Music** Some devices play MP3 music files so you can listen to music while reading. Four models on test also support video formats.

**Screen size** Measured diagonally, this determines the eBook reader's size. This test had a range of 6" (15.2cm) and 5" models; some triallists found the Kindle DX and Apple iPad's 9.7" screens too big and unwieldy.

## COMING SOON

More multi-functional tablets are coming out in competition with the iPad, such as the Toshiba Libretto, Samsung Galaxy Tab and Telstra T-Touch Tab. Keep your eye out for information on these devices in our next eBook reader update later in 2011.

| File formats supported |            |      |      |     |     |     |     | SPECIFICATIONS |                      |               |            |                  |                           |                   |            |                            |                  |            |
|------------------------|------------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------------|----------------------|---------------|------------|------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Microphone             | Dictionary | EPUB | HTML | RTF | MP3 | WAV | PNG | TIF            | Screen size (inches) | Power options | Resolution | Grayscale levels | Internal storage capacity | Removable storage | Weight (g) | Dimensions (mm, H x W x D) | Contact          | Price (\$) |
|                        | ✓          | ✓    |      | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   |                | 6                    | USB           | 800 x 600  | 16               | 2GB                       | SD & MS           | 211        | 168 x 119 x 9.5            | sony.com.au      | 299        |
| ✓                      | ✓          | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓              | 9.7                  | PA            | 1024 x 768 | E                | 32GB                      |                   | 730        | 243 x 190 x 13.4           | apple.com.au     | 928        |
|                        | ✓          | ✓    |      | ✓   | ✓   |     |     |                | 5                    | USB           | 800 x 600  | 16               | 2GB                       |                   | 154        | 145 x 104 x 8.5            | sony.com.au      | 229        |
| ✓                      |            |      | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   |                | 6                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 16               | 4GB                       |                   | 232 / 222  | 190 x 123 x 8.5            | amazon.com       | 189 / 139  |
|                        | ✓          |      | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   |                | 9.7                  | USB           | 1200 x 824 | 16               | 4GB                       |                   | 542        | 264 x 182 x 9              | amazon.com       | 379        |
| ✓                      |            | ✓    |      |     | ✓   |     |     |                | 6                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 8                | 2GB                       | SD                | 284        | 203 x 127 x 9              | iriver.com.au    | 399        |
|                        |            | ✓    |      |     |     |     |     |                | 6                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 8                | 1GB                       | SD                | 211        | 184 x 120 x 10             | koboereader.com  | 179        |
|                        | ✓          | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   | ✓              | 6                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 16               | 512MB                     | SD                | 308        | 196 x 121 x 10.6           | bebook.net.au    | 449        |
|                        |            | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |                | 5                    | USB           | 800 x 480  | E                | 2GB                       | MicroSD           | 179        | 149 x 104 x 10.6           | pioneer.net.au   | 129        |
|                        |            | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   | ✓              | 6                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 4                | 512MB                     | SD (up to 4GB)    | 220        | 184 x 120 x 10             | ecoreader.com.au | 200        |
|                        |            | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   | ✓              | 5                    | USB           | 600 x 800  | 8                | 512MB                     | SD                | 165        | 151 x 105 x 10             | bebook.net.au    | 189        |
|                        | ✓          | ✓    | ✓    |     | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |                | 5                    | USB, PA       | 800 x 480  | E                | 2GB                       | SD                | 189        | 149 x 104 x 10.6           | pico-life.com.au | 129        |
| ✓                      |            | ✓    | ✓    |     | ✓   |     | ✓   | ✓              | 5                    | USB, PA       | 800 x 600  | 8                | 2GB                       | SD                | 169        | 152 x 108 x 12             | hanvon.com       | 199        |
|                        |            | ✓    | ✓    | ✓   | ✓   |     | ✓   |                | 5                    | USB           | 800 x 480  | E                | 2GB                       | MicroSD           | 173        | 155 x 100 x 10             | lasercio.net     | 150        |

The Kindle Wi-Fi + 3G is identical to the Kindle Wi-Fi D00901. A couple of minor differences are noted in the table. (B) Stated recharge time for USB = 4 hours; via power adapter = 2 hours. 3G modem. (D) Bluetooth. (E) Colour screen. **File formats supported** All models support PDF. The iPad, Laser, Stash and DreamBook offer support for some video file formats. **PA** Power adaptor. **escape/Portrait mode** All models support this except the Kobo.





STORY MARTHA PSIROUKIS

## Add sizzle to your summer

CHOICE serves up barbecue options for entertainers, happy campers and the space-shy alike.

### NUTSHELL

>> On test: 14 barbecues, ranging from small portables to large four-burners.

>> All the barbecues on test are very good or good performers overall, so look for one that best suits your needs and circumstances.

**T**he word "barbecue" conjures up images of juicy steaks and gourmet sausages sizzling on a crowded hotplate. However, modern barbecues can tackle more creative cooking – and summer is the perfect season for getting the most out of this Aussie icon (see CHOICE Online, opposite). >

### HOW WE TEST

**Cooking performance** Our home economist, Fiona Mair, cooks steak and sausages with the hood open, turning them once only. This stringent test is to check how evenly the hotplate reaches and maintains a high temperature, and how well it controls flare-ups. At home, you may compensate for cool and hot spots by moving the food around.

Fiona roasts a whole chicken by placing it on a baking tray in the centre of the plates with the outside burners on medium heat, and the hood down. She cooks marinated wings on the hotplate. The wings and roast are turned only once. The roasting assesses the performance at moderate temperatures over a long period, while the marinated wings need a low temperature so the marinade doesn't burn. Cooking in this way is comparable to cooking in an oven.

**Ease of use** Fiona looks for easy access when moving and turning the food, and notes any discomfort such as smoke blowing into her face. She also looks at moving and cleaning the barbecue, how easy the controls are to use and how easily the gas bottle can be fitted.



### GAS SAFETY TIPS

- Replace damaged or rusty cylinders.
  - Always keep LPG cylinders upright.
  - Never use a barbecue on the wrong kind of gas.
  - Don't barbecue in a confined space or indoors.
- See [www.choice.com.au/bbqsafety](http://www.choice.com.au/bbqsafety) for more.

### ABOUT THE REST

The newly tested models below that didn't make our What to Buy list are still good performers overall. For more information on previously tested models, see *Hot Fun* in the Summertime, *CHOICE* December 2009/January 2010 [page 55] for large barbecues, and *Barbecues for the Balcony*, *CHOICE* December 2008/January 2009 [page 52] for small barbecues.

#### LARGE

The **Turbo**, **Matador** and **Cordon Bleu** score well for cooking performance and ease of use, but the **Cordon Bleu**'s thermometer isn't accurate, while the **Turbo** takes longest to assemble and is the most expensive to run. And, although the **Matador** is relatively cheap initially, its running costs are quite high.

The **Grilled Skew** performs very well for cooking and is easy to manoeuvre, but its hood directs smoke into your face, its food warmer hinders access to the rear of the cooking surface (you can remove the warmer), its hood thermometer is not accurate and lifting its gas bottle into the cupboard requires considerable effort.

The **Patio by Jamie Durie** and **Everdure Figura Esee** have good cooking scores, but they're not as easy to use as our recommended models. Both direct smoke into your face when the hood is up, their gas bottles are difficult to position, their thermometers are inaccurate and they're not very easy to clean.

#### SMALL

The **Beefearer Sportzgrill** is a good all-rounder. It is quick and easy to assemble, has good access to food, with no smoke being directed into the face, and its side tables can be removed and stored inside the barbecue. On the downside, it's unable to roast as its hood is not high enough, it has no wheels and its hood becomes extremely hot, so extra care is needed.

## WHAT TO BUY



# 88% Weber Family Q300

BEST BUY

MOST COMPACT, LOWEST RUNNING COSTS OF THE LARGE BARBECUES

PRICE \$799

## GOOD POINTS

- Good access to the cooking area.
- No smoke is directed into your face.
- Very fuel-efficient.
- Side tables fold away when not needed.
- Very easy to assemble and manoeuvre.
- Gas bottle is easy to fit.
- Hood thermometer is accurate.

## BAD POINTS

- The cooking area is only a char-grill plate, although griddle or breakfast plates can be bought separately.
- Cleaning around the burners can be awkward.
- Stand-alone piezo ignition requires some pressure to activate.

## WHAT TO BUY

Most people tend to move food around the barbecue to cooler or warmer spots, which compensates for uneven heating. But you can't compensate for poor ease of use, such as smoke and heat being directed into your face. Our top overall performers perform well for both ease of use and performance, but there are other models in the table (page 50) with good ease of use scores that are also worth considering if you're an active cook – see About the Rest, left. Our Best Buys are good performers with a low purchase price, combined with a low five-year running cost. For models not profiled here, go to [www.choice.com.au/bbq](http://www.choice.com.au/bbq)

### LARGE

**NEW** Weber Family Q300 with trolley \$799

BEST BUY

### SMALL/PORTABLE

**NEW** Everdure Buddy Patio NBUDLPC-09 \$299

Weber Q200 with trolley (Dec 09/Jan 10) \$529

Befeater Discovery 2 Burner (Dec 09/Jan 10) \$699

### ULTRA-PORTABLE

**NEW** Coleman RoadTrip Grill 9949-750XA \$349

BEST BUY



# 82% Everdure Buddy Patio NBUDLPC-09

BEST BUY

FOR THE BALCONY AND OCCASIONAL PICNIC, LOW RUNNING COSTS

PRICE \$299

## GOOD POINTS

- Easy and quick to assemble.
- Trolley is easy to manoeuvre.
- Very easy to clean.
- No smoke is directed into your face.
- The most fuel-efficient BBQ on test.
- Hood thermometer is accurate.
- Good access to food.
- Non-stick cooking surface (avoid using metal utensils).
- Transportable with a collapsible cart on wheels.

## BAD POINTS

- Very small cooking area.
- Slanted hot-plate and griddle plate means food can slide.
- Has no char-grill, so food is not exposed to the flame as with a typical BBQ.
- Cleaning around the burners can be awkward.
- Stand-alone piezo ignition requires some pressure to activate.



# 76% Coleman RoadTrip Grill 9949-750XA

FOR THE REGULAR TRAVELLER/CAMPER – EASIEST TO TRANSPORT

PRICE \$349

## GOOD POINTS

- Easy and quick to assemble and transport.
- Very easy to use controls and to clean.
- Good open access to food.
- Does not direct smoke into your face.
- Good-sized cooking area for the total size of the barbecue.
- Side tables slide away under the barbecue when not in use.

## BAD POINTS

- Not as fuel-efficient as some other barbecues on test.
- Hood gets hot and is not high enough to accommodate a whole chicken.

Modern barbecues can handle creative cooking tasks – you can even use them as alfresco pizza ovens



## CHOICE ONLINE

Why not roast your Christmas turkey – teamed with a char-grill vegetable salad – outside in a barbecue rather than turning your kitchen into a sauna? Find this and other mouth-watering recipes on our website, [www.choice.com.au/cook](http://www.choice.com.au/cook).

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Controls** should be clearly labelled and have positive stops at both the low and high positions, so you don't accidentally turn a burner off when adjusting the heat. Etched labels on stainless steel are better than painted ones, which are likely to be removed over time or during cleaning.

**Hotplates, grills and burners** Cast-iron hotplates are more susceptible to rust; if you live in a coastal area, enamel or stainless-steel

hotplates are recommended (see table, below, for details).

**Easy access** to the entire cooking area – the warming racks may get in the way.

**The hood opening angle** should tilt back far enough not to direct smoke into your face.

**Handles** should be far enough from the hot lid panel behind so you don't burn your hand.

**The fat tray** should be easy to remove and replace, and be self-centring to catch the fat.

**Ignition types** are usually piezo or electronic.

Piezo is where you press a button or one of the gas knobs and it generates a spark to ignite the gas. Some piezo systems direct a jet of flame into the burners to light them more reliably. Electronic ignition uses a battery to create a spark.

**Natural gas conversion kits** can be bought to convert LPG connections to natural gas, but you may need to specify the fuel type before

| Product                                                             | Performance       |                               |                    |                                          |                           |                    |                       | Features     |                          |             |                     |                  | Specifications     |                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Brand / model (in rank order)                                       | Overall score (%) | Cooking performance score (%) | Evenness score (%) | Evenness with high fat cooking score (%) | Low temperature score (%) | Roasting score (%) | Ease of use score (%) | Warming rack | Reversible cooking plate | Side burner | Side tray / folding | Storage cupboard | Natural gas option | Hotplate / grill material      |
| Large                                                               |                   |                               |                    |                                          |                           |                    |                       |              |                          |             |                     |                  |                    |                                |
| # Weber Family Q300 LP (A)                                          | 88                | 98                            | 100                | 90                                       | 100                       | 100                | 72                    |              |                          |             | ✓ / ✓               |                  | ✓                  | Porcelain-enamel cast iron (F) |
| # Matador Executive MKII S/S MBQ1002                                | 77                | 78                            | 80                 | 60                                       | 80                        | 90                 | 76                    | ✓            | ✓                        | ✓           | ✓ / -               | Black glass      | ✓                  | Cast iron with non-stick       |
| # Cordon Bleu 4 CB4CWWH                                             | 76                | 78                            | 80                 | 60                                       | 80                        | 90                 | 74                    | ✓            | ✓                        |             | ✓ / -               | Black            | ✓                  | Vitreous enamel cast iron      |
| # Grilled Skew 657839 (4 Burner Deluxe)                             | 76                | 80                            | 80                 | 70                                       | 90                        | 80                 | 70                    | ✓            | ✓                        | ✓           | ✓ / -               | Black            | ✓                  | Cast iron                      |
| # Turbo Classic 4 with Hood on Cart                                 | 76                | 76                            | 70                 | 55                                       | 90                        | 90                 | 76                    | ✓            |                          |             | ✓ / ✓               | Stainless steel  | ✓                  | Vitreous enamel cast iron      |
| # Patio by Jamie Durie Stainless Steel Chef BBQ (code: 736 6222)    | 73                | 79                            | 80                 | 70                                       | 75                        | 90                 | 64                    | ✓            | ✓                        | ✓           | ✓ / -               | Stainless steel  | ✓                  | Cast iron                      |
| # Everdure Figura Esee                                              | 71                | 76                            | 60                 | 55                                       | 90                        | 100                | 64                    | ✓            |                          | ✓           | ✓ / -               | Stainless steel  |                    | Cast iron                      |
| Small / Portable                                                    |                   |                               |                    |                                          |                           |                    |                       |              |                          |             |                     |                  |                    |                                |
| # Everdure Buddy Patio NBUDLPC-09                                   | 82                | 91                            | 75                 | 90                                       | 100                       | 100                | 68                    |              |                          | - / -       |                     |                  |                    | Teflon coated                  |
| Weber Q200 (B)                                                      | 82                | 90                            | 80                 | 80                                       | 100                       | 100                | 70                    |              |                          |             | ✓ / ✓               |                  | ✓                  | Porcelain-enamel cast iron (F) |
| Beefeater Discovery 2 Burner                                        | 81                | 85                            | 70                 | 70                                       | 100                       | 100                | 76                    | ✓            |                          | ✓           | ✓ / -               |                  | ns                 | Porcelain-enamel cast iron     |
| # Coleman RoadTrip Grill 9949-750XA                                 | 76                | 75                            | 80                 | 65                                       | 80                        | na                 | 78                    |              |                          |             | ✓ / (D)             |                  |                    | Enamelled cast                 |
| # Beefeater Sportgrill - Portable 2 Burner Gas Barbecue and Cooktop | 75                | 78                            | 90                 | 70                                       | 75                        | na                 | 70                    |              |                          |             | ✓ / (E)             |                  | ns                 | Porcelain-enamel cast iron     |
| Weber 57cm One-Touch Kettle with Gas Kit                            | 72                | 76                            | 35                 | 70                                       | 100                       | 100                | 66                    |              |                          |             |                     |                  |                    | Stainless steel                |
| Grandhall Neil Perry T-Grill (C)                                    | 70                | 76                            | 80                 | 65                                       | 70                        | 90                 | 60                    | ✓            |                          |             | ✓ / -               |                  | ✓                  | Porcelain-enamel cast iron (F) |

**USING THE TABLE** Cooking performance The scores for cooking steak, sausages and marinated chicken wings and roasting a chicken are weighted equally. Where we could not roast a whole chicken, the n of the remaining tests are weighted equally. **Ease of use** is made up of: Ease of cooking: 40%; mobility, using the controls and cleaning: 20% each. **Dimensions** are measured with the hood and side trays close (applicable) and includes knobs, wheels and handles. **Gas consumption** is measured with all burners on high. **Running cost** This is based on using the barbecue three times a week for 30 minutes over five years; should expect your barbecue to last at least that long, at an average cost of \$3/kg of LPG gas. The cost of gas is an average of what we paid for 9kg gas bottle refills during our test. A barbecue is generally cheap

buying, as some models can't be converted later. If you regularly use your barbecue and have a designated spot for it, consider connecting to natural gas, as the running costs will be less than with LPG. However, the initial set-up costs may be high.

**Exterior finishes** include painted surfaces, vitreous enamel and stainless steel. Paint is the cheapest finish and can scratch or flake over time. Vitreous enamel is tougher

and more durable. Stainless steel is also very durable but can discolour when heated, and may require extra cleaning as it shows smudges more readily than other surfaces.

**A double-skin hood** reduces the external hood temperature and protects your hands and fingers from getting sizzled.

**Assembling** the barbecue and trolley can be difficult and time-consuming, so a preassembled model or more basic design

may suit you better, or you may want to pay the retailer to assemble it.

**Side panels** protect the food and flame from draughts on windy days.

**Hood closure resistance / stability** prevents the hood accidentally banging shut on a windy day.

**Optional accessories**, such as pizza stones, griddle plates, breakfast plates and rotisseries can add to the versatility of your barbecue.

|                              |                              |                            |                                                                  |                        |                           |                         |                        |      |      | COSTS                       |            |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------|------|-----------------------------|------------|
|                              | Burner/s material            | Dimensions (cm. H x W x D) | External temperatures after 60min (°C, controls / handle / hood) | Portable / weight (kg) | Gas consumption (kg / hr) | Total cooking area (m2) | Contact                |      |      | Running cost (\$ / 5 years) | Price (\$) |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 110 x 142 x 55             | 22 / 34 / 120                                                    | - / na                 | 0.44                      | 0.28                    | weberbbq.com.au        | 510  | 799  |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 119 x 171 x 63             | 27 / 27 / 102                                                    | - / na                 | 1.15                      | 0.37                    | bunnings.com.au        | 1346 | 599  |                             |            |
| Cast iron                    | Cast iron                    | 124 x 184 x 63             | 39 / 32 / 109                                                    | - / na                 | 1.10                      | 0.35                    | barbequesgalore.com.au | 1287 | 799  |                             |            |
| Cast iron                    | Cast iron                    | 124 x 170 x 60             | 38 / 31 / 88                                                     | - / na                 | 1.13                      | 0.36                    | mitre10.com.au         | 1324 | 699  |                             |            |
| Vitreous enamelled cast iron | Vitreous enamelled cast iron | 121 x 172 x 61             | 38 / 31 / 100                                                    | - / na                 | 1.24                      | 0.35                    | barbequesgalore.com.au | 1451 | 1259 |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 115 x 178 x 62             | 31 / 30 / 104                                                    | - / na                 | 0.98                      | 0.37                    | bigw.com.au            | 1151 | 498  |                             |            |
| Vitreous enamel              | Vitreous enamel              | 124 x 154 x 59             | 33 / 45 / 100                                                    | - / na                 | 1.10                      | 0.34                    | everdure.com           | 1289 | 799  |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 110 x 91 x 49              | 37 / 44 / 103                                                    | ✓ / 27.1               | 0.18                      | 0.17                    | everdure.com           | 215  | 299  |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 99.5 x 83 x 51             | 22 / 33 / 113                                                    | ✓ / 25.6               | 0.32                      | 0.18                    | weberbbq.com.au        | 374  | 529  |                             |            |
| Cast iron                    | Cast iron                    | 116 x 119 x 65             | 31 / 26 / 128                                                    | - / 54.4               | 0.67                      | 0.22                    | beefeaterbbq.com       | 782  | 699  |                             |            |
| ns                           | ns                           | 86 x 80 x 56               | 34 / 36 / 186                                                    | ✓ / 19.3               | 0.46                      | 0.20                    | coleman.com            | 538  | 349  |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 95 x 74 x 45               | 23 / 31 / 192                                                    | ✓ / 26.0               | 0.36                      | 0.23                    | beefeaterbbq.com       | 426  | 396  |                             |            |
| Stainless steel              | Stainless steel              | 96 x 60 x 71               | 17 / 43 / 117                                                    | ✓ / 13.9               | 0.23                      | 0.23                    | weberbbq.com.au        | 271  | 419  |                             |            |
| ns                           | ns                           | 117 x 117 x 71             | 26 / 31 / 37                                                     | - / 61.5               | 0.67                      | 0.18                    | grandhall.com.au       | 782  | 999  |                             |            |

natural gas. Our Best Buy recommendations take running costs into account. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2010. **TABLE NOTES** # Newly tested model. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. **(A)** The Family Q300-P (\$839) is similar to the model on test, but also comes with a factory-fitted, half-width hotplate. **(B)** Comes with a trolley cart, but can be purchased with a more stable "stationary" cart as used. **(C)** New versions will have castors for better mobility and a lighter hood, and may come standard with a pizza stone. **(D)** Side tables extend and retract under the barbecue. **(E)** Trays can be removed and stored in the barbecue. **(F)** No hotplate supplied, has char-grill only. A hotplate is available as an optional extra for the Weber barbecues, or as standard with Family Q300-P.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

# Video killed the media player

These portable media players are handy but require a lot of patience, especially when transferring video content.

There were a few more Apple products in our last test of portable media players; however, Apple has not released a new version of the Apple Classic this year and the new iPod nano no longer plays video. We tested the new Apple touch and are happy with its performance, provided you (counter-intuitively) choose to transcode (change format) video to iPad format rather than iPod. ■

## NUTSHELL

- >> On test: 13 portable media players, ranging from \$99 to \$399.
- >> We continue to be disappointed by the lack of a standard video format for these players.

Every time CHOICE tests portable media players, we reach the same conclusion: getting video onto them is a chore and the result can be disappointing. This round of testing confirms the chore is no less onerous; in fact, some new models are even less effective than those previously tested (see CHOICE Online, below).

We've stopped testing battery life because there are now only marginal differences between battery claims and actual performance (though we still list the claimed battery life in the table – see below). We have redistributed the weightings of the now-defunct battery score to both ease of use and sound.

## HOW WE TEST

To find out how our CHOICE tester, James Thomson, tests portable media players, log on to [www.choice.com.au/PMP](http://www.choice.com.au/PMP)

| PRODUCT                          | PERFORMANCE       |                       |                         |                         |                                          | FEATURES                           |                                      |          |                  | SPECIFICATIONS              |                                 |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Brand / model<br>(in rank order) | Overall score (%) | Ease of use score (%) | Sound quality score (%) | Video quality score (%) | Claimed battery life playing video (hrs) | Playback while recharging (AC/USB) | Can be used as a mass storage device | FM radio | External speaker | Supplied software           | Compatible third-party software |
| Apple iPod touch 32GB            | 81                | 72                    | 82                      | 95                      | 7                                        | ✓ / ✓                              |                                      |          | ✓                | iTunes                      | No                              |
| Sony Walkman NWZ-S744            | 77                | 72                    | 78                      | 85                      | 10                                       | – / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        |                  | Content Transfer            | WM                              |
| Microsoft Zune HD                | 75                | 65                    | 82                      | 80                      | 9                                        | – / –                              |                                      | ✓        |                  | Zune                        | No                              |
| Sony Walkman NWZ-A845            | 74                | 71                    | 70                      | 85                      | 9                                        | – / –                              | ✓                                    |          |                  | Content Transfer            | WM                              |
| Cowon J3                         | 70                | 71                    | 82                      | 50                      | 11                                       | – / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        | ✓                | JetAudio                    | WM                              |
| Creative Zen X-Fi Style          | 70                | 74                    | 72                      | 60                      | 5                                        | ✓ / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        | ✓                | Centrale                    | WM                              |
| Cowon iAudio 9                   | 69                | 64                    | 81                      | 60                      | 7                                        | – / –                              | ✓                                    |          | ✓                | JetAudio                    | WM                              |
| Cowon V5                         | 68                | 60                    | 83                      | 60                      | 10                                       | – / –                              | ✓                                    |          | ✓                | JetAudio                    | WM                              |
| Archos 3 Vision                  | 61                | 63                    | 75                      | 40                      | 4                                        | – / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        |                  | None                        | WM                              |
| Lenoxx MP5-1000                  | 57                | 60                    | 67                      | 40                      | 4                                        | ✓ / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        | ✓                | AVI Converter               | WM                              |
| Laser MP4-T9-4GB                 | 55                | 57                    | 56                      | 50                      | 3                                        | – / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        |                  | None                        | WM                              |
| Archos 2 Vision                  | 54                | 57                    | 74                      | 20                      | 4                                        | – / –                              | ✓                                    |          |                  | AVI Converter               | WM                              |
| iRiver E30                       | 51                | 56                    | 74                      | 10                      | ns                                       | – / –                              | ✓                                    | ✓        |                  | iRiver plus, MovieConverter | WM                              |

**USING THE TABLE SCORES** The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 40%; Sound quality: 35%; Video quality: 25%. **Playback while recharging** means you can listen to music while the player is recharging when it's connected to the mains power or your PC. **Can be used as a mass storage device** means you can plug the media player into a PC and have it appear in your system as a drive from which you can drag and drop files. **Capacity** is in gigabytes – 2GB can store about 500 songs of average length, while rough



## CHOICE ONLINE

For details on which video file types the players claim to play and previously tested models, see our online story at [www.choice.com.au/PMP](http://www.choice.com.au/PMP)



## WHAT TO BUY

### 81% Apple iPod touch 32GB

#### PRICE \$378 GOOD POINTS

- Excellent video rendering of iPad-formatted videos (iPod-formatted videos are only OK).
  - Very good sound quality.
  - Easy to use in playback mode.
  - High resolution screen.
  - Can display on TV (cables extra).
  - Wireless and Bluetooth support.
  - Has camera.
  - Browser functionality.
- #### BAD POINTS
- File transfer is via iTunes only.
  - No FM radio by default.



## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Controls** All media players on test allow you to fast-forward or rewind through some of your media files, but some have the main controls as easy-to-access buttons rather than buried deep within a touchscreen menu.

**Rechargeable battery** Most media players have a built-in rechargeable (Li-ion or Li-polymer) battery pack you can recharge from your computer's USB port or an AC adapter. Batteries generally charge faster from an AC adapter than from a USB port.

**Inbuilt memory** Media players with inbuilt Flash memory can take more of a knock than models using a hard disc drive. However, hard drives are available with up to 250GB capacity, whereas Flash memory tends to be limited to 32GB or 64GB.

**Removable memory card support** allows you to store photos and video clips and transfer them to a computer. You can also keep separate music/movie collections on multiple cards to use when needed.

**Computer connection type** A USB connection of any type allows you to transfer files to your computer. Some players use a commonly available mini or micro USB connection and can appear on the PC as an external drive.

**Headphone connection** A media player with a 2.5mm or 3.5mm jack will allow you to use a standard set of headphones to listen to music if you don't like the set it comes with. All players on test use a standard headphone connection.



| Model    | Weight (g) | Capacity (GB) | Displayable screen size (mm, W x H) | Minimum system requirements | Contact                | Price (\$) |
|----------|------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| 59 x 7   | 112        | 32            | 75 x 50                             | Windows XP; Mac OS X        | apple.com.au           | 378        |
| 40 x 8   | 70         | 8             | 51 x 31                             | Windows XP                  | sony.com.au            | 299        |
| 53 x 10  | 85         | 16            | 72 x 41                             | Windows XP                  | zune.net               | 300        |
| 47 x 8   | 78         | 16            | 61 x 36                             | Windows XP                  | sony.com.au            | 399        |
| 57 x 10  | 88         | 16            | 76 x 51                             | Windows ME; OS X; Linux     | cowonglobal.com        | 295        |
| 84 x 13  | 71         | 16            | 49 x 36                             | Windows XP                  | au.creative.com        | 140        |
| 43 x 10  | 55         | 16            | 51 x 30                             | Windows ME; OS X; Linux     | cowonglobal.com        | 199        |
| 127 x 16 | 213        | 16            | 104 x 62                            | Windows ME; OS X; Linux     | cowonglobal.com        | 379        |
| 52 x 9   | 76         | 8             | 64 x 38                             | ns                          | itechinternational.com | 165        |
| 139 x 15 | 182        | 8             | 95 x 53                             | Windows 2000                | lenox.com.au           | 150        |
| 91 x 10  | 66         | 4             | 65 x 39                             | Windows ME                  | laserco.net.au         | 110        |
| 44 x 10  | 51         | 8             | 39 x 32                             | ns                          | itechinternational.com | 139        |
| 42 x 10  | 55         | 4             | 45 x 28                             | Windows ME                  | iriver.com.au          | 99         |

hours of good-quality MP4 video will take up about 1GB. **Compatible third-party software** Most media players can use Windows Media Player, which comes installed on Windows-based PCs. **Price** Recommended retail, November 2010. **TABLE NOTES** ns Not stated.

## ABOUT THE REST

All portable media players on test have FM radio except the **Apple**, **Cowon V5** and **Archos 2 Vision**.

Both **Sony** products have very good video quality and are easy to use, but neither features external speakers.

The **Microsoft Zune HD** has very good sound and video, but is let down by just OK ease of use. It doesn't have any charging symbol on screen so it's difficult to see if there is a fault, and its controls are not immediately intuitive.

All the **Cowon** players have very good sound but are let down by their video quality.

The **Creative Zen X-Fi Style** has good ease of use and sound but is let down by its video quality.

Both the **Archos** players and the **iRiver** have good sound, but are let down by ease of use and video quality. The **Archos 3 Vision** doesn't come with any software to convert video files.

Both the **Lenox** and **Laser** players didn't perform very well across all their performance scores, but were let down in particular by video quality.



STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

## Focusing on video

Should you make room in your life for a dedicated video camcorder?

lack of extensive exposure control and optical zoom adversely affects the quality of the final video.

Another issue to consider is whether you want to take occasional video to post to YouTube or whether you want a high-quality record for future reference to be viewed on a high-quality display. For the former, a pocket camcorder is a much better return on investment compared with the three SD camcorders on test here.

Statements such as "full HD", "1080p" or "1080i" indicate support for the highest resolution video your camcorder can record and display. All the HD camcorders on test will play both digital video and audio through a High Definition Multimedia Interface (HDMI), providing the best possible audio and picture quality on your flat-screen TV. However, they all use a mini HDMI connection, so if you don't get this cable with the camera, factor in about an extra \$50 for an appropriate adapter or a mini HDMI to HDMI cable. >

### NUTSHELL

>> If you have more than a casual interest in video, consider a dedicated camcorder. >> Compared with other devices that capture HD video as an additional feature, the top-performing HD camcorders on test deliver better video in all lighting conditions.

**W**ith so many devices now able to record high definition (HD) video, why would you even consider spending up to \$2000 on a camcorder? As with many things, the devil is in the detail. CHOICE tested 12 HD and three standard definition (SD) digital camcorders priced between \$449 and \$2099, and found the top HD performers not only deliver great video but also extensive exposure control to deal with challenging lighting environments.

Some pocket camcorders (see CHOICE, July 2010, page 51 for our review) priced at well below \$300 are able to take surprisingly good quality HD video in favourable conditions; we're happy to recommend the top performers for their value and performance under good lighting conditions. However, when the light gets dim or the subject in the video is moving quickly or is more than a few metres away from the camera, their

### ABOUT THE REST

#### HIGH DEFINITION

The **Sony HDR-XR350V** has a 160GB hard drive as well as support for SDHC and Sony's MS card, and delivers consistently good video picture quality across various lighting conditions. It lacks some of the features available on the top-scoring Sony model, but costs \$400 less.

The **Panasonic HDC-HS60** is a more affordable alternative to the top-scoring Panasonic model and although its hard drive is half the size of the HDC-HS700, the 25X optical zoom is the largest of the HD models on test.

The **Canon Legria HF M31** delivers excellent optical image stabilisation and support for a headphone, useful when attempting to control audio while videoing.

The **JVC GZ-HM550** is very easy to use and performs well when shooting outside in good sunlight conditions, however its battery performance is poor.

While the battery performance for the **JVC GZ-HM1** is the best of the HD camcorders on test, its overall video performance is mediocre.

The **Sony HDR-XR150** is easy to use and exhibits surprisingly good image stabilisation for a unit with an electronic image stabiliser. Video quality is good in well-lit environments either outside or indoors, however dealing with low light can be a challenge.

The **JVC GZ-HD500** and **Canon Legria HFR18** deliver reasonable video quality, but not as good as the

other models on test at a similar price.

The **Sanyo** is the lowest-priced HD camcorder on test and it shows, with poor low-light performance and no significant internal memory.

#### STANDARD DEFINITION

The three SD camcorders on test are all easy to use, with the **Panasonic SDR-H85** bringing you close to the action with a 70X optical zoom and optical image stabiliser.

The optical zoom on the **Canon Legria FS37** and **JVC-M6750** is still significantly larger than the HD models at about 40X, but the lower-quality SD video resolution is an issue as larger-screen TVs of more than 117cm become increasingly commonplace.

## WHAT TO BUY



## 79% Canon Legria HF S21 (HD)

PRICE \$1899

### GOOD POINTS

The Legria HF S21 is Canon's flagship consumer camcorder, and the use of a Flash memory rather than a hard drive for internal storage allows a lot of features and functionality to be squeezed into a compact package. As well as the impressive 64GB internal Flash memory, you also get two SDHC card slots, which should allow you to capture several hours of HD video before needing to look for another card.

Autofocus performance is very good and the start-up time of about six seconds is acceptable. Our testers found the sound quality recording the best of the models on test and picture quality under various lighting conditions to be very good. A video lamp is also handy when shooting gets difficult in dim lighting conditions.

The HF S21 performs well as a compact camera replacement, with still photos at up to eight-megapixel resolution comfortably producing photo print quality images at up to A4 size.

The ability to convert HD video from one card to SD video on the other is a handy feature for users wanting to post video onto YouTube or another video sharing site, and the combination of extensive manual control and ease of use out of the box makes it a good option for the enthusiast as well as family members who just want to shoot and shoot.

### BAD POINTS

A spare, fully charged high-capacity battery is an essential accessory if you plan on travelling with this camera, as you won't get much more than an hour with the battery that comes in the standard kit. Also, while a 10X optical zoom is fairly standard for a HD camcorder, some users moving from a tape-based camera may find the range limiting.



## 72% Sony HDR-CX550V (HD)

PRICE \$1899

### GOOD POINTS

The Sony HDR-CX550V is an easy-to-use enthusiast camcorder, with excellent still photo capabilities and very good video performance under good lighting conditions. Similar in size and weight to the Canon Legria HF S21, it also has 64GB of internal Flash memory and supports two removable cards at the same time. However, the Sony uses the SD format for one slot and its proprietary MS Pro Duo for the other.

An interesting feature included in this and several Sony models is a built-in GPS chip that allows you to use maps installed on the camera to pinpoint where movies and still images are taken. These can then be used in your video or posted online.

### BAD POINTS

Although the CX550 is promoted by Sony as a good performer in low light and can operate in night mode, our testers found its overall picture quality not as good as the other top-performing cameras in the recommended list when shooting in dim conditions.



## 70% Panasonic HDC-HS700 (HD)

PRICE \$2099

### GOOD POINTS

All our top-performing camcorders, including the HDC-HS700, have a viewfinder to help compose a shot in bright light. The HS700 is also one of the easiest camcorders to operate, is ready to shoot in about two seconds and performs well when shooting indoors and in low light. It is also the top-performing hard-drive based model, with a huge 240GB drive as well as support for removable SDHC cards.

For now, the Panasonic HDC-HS700 is the only model on test to support 1080p resolution. However, to take advantage of this higher resolution, you need to connect to your TV with a HDMI cable.

### BAD POINTS

The macro (close-up) performance of the HDC-HS700 is not as good as most of the other models on test and while the image resolution of 14 megapixel sounds great, our testers were not impressed with the overall picture quality in photo mode.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**Mac compatible** If you own a Mac computer and want to use the extremely popular iMovie program included with the Mac operating system, make sure the video camera you want to buy is compatible. The first few generations of camcorders using USB had problems working with the Mac OS in general and iMovie in particular.

If you have a Mac and are looking at one

of the camcorders on test, go to the Apple support site for camcorders at [support.apple.com/kb/ht3290](http://support.apple.com/kb/ht3290) and look for the particular model.

You will notice that even Apple can't really give a "yes" or "no" answer for many of the camcorder models regarding specific issues on how to import/export video, stabilisation issues and so on.

An input for an external microphone usually provides better sound quality than a built-in one

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**System** Do you want SD or HD and do you want a hard drive or a model with removable memory?

**Accessory shoe** allows you to attach things such as an external microphone or video lamp to the camera.

**Remote controls** let you do most playback functions plus additional functions, some of which may only be available via the remote.

**Video lamp/photo flash** allows you to video or take still photos in low-light conditions.

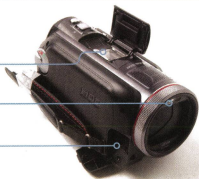
**Low-light recording** Most camcorders achieve fairly good picture quality even in poor light. Some have an infrared lamp that allows you to make recordings even in complete darkness. However,

this only works well with objects less than about three metres away and produces a monochrome (black-and-white or black-and-green) picture.

**An input for an external microphone** usually provides better sound quality than a built-in one. So if good audio quality is important to you, make sure

the camcorder you're interested in has one.

**HDMI connection** for HD camcorders deliver the best possible digital video and audio. However, all models on test also require a mini HDMI adapter to work with a HD TV.



| PRODUCT                                     |                   | PERFORMANCE           |    |                         |    |                       |    |                       |    |                                    |     |                            |   | FEATURES            |   |                     |   |                               |   |                   |   |                           |   |                |   |                          |   |                |   |                                |   |            |   |     |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|----|-------------------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|------------------------------------|-----|----------------------------|---|---------------------|---|---------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|-------------------|---|---------------------------|---|----------------|---|--------------------------|---|----------------|---|--------------------------------|---|------------|---|-----|
| Brand / model (in rank order within groups) | Overall score (%) | Ease of use score (%) |    | Sound quality score (%) |    | Versatility score (%) |    | Still photo score (%) |    | Daylight picture quality score (%) |     | Artificial light score (%) |   | Low light score (%) |   | Autofocus score (%) |   | Image stabilisation score (%) |   | Battery score (%) |   | Length of operation (min) |   | Remote control |   | Video lamp / photo flash |   | Accessory shoe |   | Dolby digital / surround sound |   | Microphone |   |     |
|                                             |                   |                       |    |                         |    |                       |    |                       |    |                                    |     |                            |   |                     |   |                     |   |                               |   |                   |   |                           |   |                |   |                          |   |                |   |                                |   |            |   |     |
| HIGH DEFINITION (HD)                        |                   |                       |    |                         |    |                       |    |                       |    |                                    |     |                            |   |                     |   |                     |   |                               |   |                   |   |                           |   |                |   |                          |   |                |   |                                |   |            |   |     |
| Canon Legria HF S21                         | 79                | 80                    | 76 | 84                      | 74 | 85                    | 88 | 77                    | 81 | 99                                 | 15  | 81                         | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Sony HDR-CX550V                             | 72                | 72                    | 59 | 77                      | 84 | 85                    | 77 | 44                    | 75 | 99                                 | 37  | 110                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Panasonic HDC-HS700                         | 70                | 83                    | 58 | 84                      | 46 | 76                    | 80 | 66                    | 79 | 77                                 | 30  | 101                        | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Sony HDR-XR350V                             | 69                | 75                    | 50 | 56                      | 84 | 78                    | 77 | 77                    | 77 | 70                                 | 40  | 115                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Panasonic HDC-HS60                          | 67                | 83                    | 68 | 64                      | 71 | 66                    | 50 | 66                    | 62 | 77                                 | 31  | 102                        | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Canon Legria HF M31                         | 67                | 70                    | 63 | 75                      | 57 | 66                    | 77 | 55                    | 68 | 99                                 | 26  | 96                         | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| JVC GZ-HM550                                | 67                | 81                    | 71 | 63                      | 62 | 80                    | 77 | 66                    | 73 | 44                                 | 18  | 85                         | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| JVC GZ-HM1                                  | 65                | 79                    | 62 | 75                      | 51 | 74                    | 55 | 55                    | 59 | 55                                 | 76  | 164                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Sony HDR-XR150                              | 61                | 76                    | 50 | 46                      | 52 | 74                    | 74 | 44                    | 70 | 73                                 | 30  | 101                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| JVC GZ-HD500                                | 60                | 80                    | 61 | 48                      | 53 | 58                    | 61 | 55                    | 73 | 48                                 | 32  | 104                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Canon Legria HF R18                         | 59                | 68                    | 65 | 58                      | 50 | 55                    | 66 | 55                    | 59 | 77                                 | 4   | 66                         | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Sanyo VPC-SH1                               | 54                | 58                    | 46 | 48                      | 56 | 55                    | 66 | 44                    | 59 | 62                                 | 34  | 107                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| STANDARD DEFINITION (SD)                    |                   |                       |    |                         |    |                       |    |                       |    |                                    |     |                            |   |                     |   |                     |   |                               |   |                   |   |                           |   |                |   |                          |   |                |   |                                |   |            |   |     |
| Panasonic SDR-H85                           | 58                | 79                    | 71 | 41                      | 64 | 38                    | 38 | 19                    | 51 | 77                                 | 70  | 156                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| Canon Legria FS37                           | 58                | 67                    | 58 | 38                      | 54 | 49                    | 52 | 48                    | 57 | 62                                 | 100 | 217                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |
| JVC GZ-MG750                                | 57                | 80                    | 60 | 40                      | 62 | 49                    | 49 | 29                    | 64 | 55                                 | 36  | 109                        | ✓ | -/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                 | ✓ | ✓/✓                           | ✓ | ✓/✓               | ✓ | ✓/✓                       | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                      | ✓ | ✓/✓            | ✓ | ✓/✓                            | ✓ | ✓/✓        | ✓ | ✓/✓ |

**USING THE TABLE** All camcorders on test support USB2. All the HD models support HDMI output for watching video on a HD TV and support AVCHD video format. Only the Panasonic HDC-HS700 has an external battery charger.

## HOW WE TEST

All tests are carried out by specialist professional labs in Europe.

**Ease of use** An expert viewing panel looks at the instructions; ease of various functions; quality and functionality of the viewfinder, LCD monitor and remote control; portability of the camcorder and data transfer to a computer. They also measure the time delay between switching the recorder on and being able to use it.

**Sound quality** The panel assesses quality of speech and music recorded with the inbuilt and external microphone (if applicable). They also look for any sensitivity to wind noise.

**Versatility** is assessed against a list of almost 50 features and functions.

**Still photo** The panel assesses the quality of photos taken in daylight, shutter delay and transfer speed of still pictures via FireWire and/or USB. All camcorders on test support USB v2.0 for video and still photo transfers.

**Picture quality** The panel assesses the resolution, sharpness, colour and overall image quality of recordings in daylight and artificial light. They also assess macro recordings, recordings made in low light and (where applicable) at night.

**Autofocus score** Our testers assess the quality and speed of auto-focusing on a number of subjects in close, mid and long range.

**Image stabilisation** The picture stabilisation function is examined,

as well as its effect on picture quality. SD camcorders are judged against a good-quality SD consumer camcorder, while HD camcorders are judged against a broadcast-quality camcorder, so the SD and HD scores are not directly comparable.

#### Battery score / recording time

The panel measures how long the battery lasts using a recording and playback test cycle. The camcorder is positioned on a slowly rotating turntable recording a well-lit room, with objects at different distances, until the camera stops. During this time, the camcorders are switched to full auto-recording mode, with the monitor, autofocus and image stabiliser switched on.

An expert viewing panel assesses the resolution, sharpness, colour and overall quality of recordings in daylight and artificial light

## SPECIFICATIONS

| Viewfinder | Touchscreen | HDMI (mini HDMI socket) | Image stabiliser | Inbuilt video / still photo storage | Removable memory type | Start-up time (sec) | Still photo image resolution (Mpx) | LCD monitor size (mm; diagonal) | Weight (g) | Dimensions (cm; H x W x L) | Optical zoom factor | Contact          | Price (\$) |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------|----------------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------|
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | Flash Memory 64GB                   | SDHC x 2              | 5.6                 | 8.0                                | 89                              | 508        | 7.5 x 9 x 15               | 10                  | canon.com.au     | 1899       |
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | Flash Memory 64GB                   | SDHC/MS Pro Duo       | 4.5                 | 12.0                               | 87                              | 490        | 8 x 8 x 14.5               | 10                  | sony.com.au      | 1899       |
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | HDD 240GB                           | SDHC/SDXC             | 2.4                 | 14.2                               | 76                              | 507        | 7 x 7.5 x 14.5             | 12                  | panasonic.com.au | 2099       |
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | HDD 160GB                           | SDHC/MS Pro Duo       | 5.7                 | 7.0                                | 67                              | 445        | 7 x 7 x 12.5               | 12                  | sony.com.au      | 1499       |
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | HDD 120GB                           | SDHC/SDXC             | 2.4                 | 5.0                                | 67                              | 369        | 6.5 x 6.5 x 12.5           | 25                  | panasonic.com.au | 999        |
| ✓          | ✓           | ✓                       | Optical          | Flash Memory 32GB                   | SDHC                  | 5.3                 | 3.3                                | 69                              | 372        | 6 x 8 x 12.5               | 15                  | canon.com.au     | 1299       |
|            | ✓           |                         | Electronic       | Flash Memory 32 GB                  | SDHC                  | 6.6                 | 9.3                                | 66                              | 300        | 6 x 6.5 x 11               | 10                  | jvc.com.au       | 1649       |
|            | ✓           |                         | Electronic       | Flash Memory 64GB                   | SDHC                  | 5.7                 | 10.0                               | 68                              | 485        | 7 x 8 x 13.5               | 10                  | jvc.com.au       | 1999       |
| ✓          |             |                         | Electronic       | HDD 120GB                           | SDHC/MS Pro Duo       | 5.0                 | 3.1                                | 67                              | 354        | 7 x 7 x 11.5               | 25                  | sony.com.au      | 899        |
|            | ✓           |                         | Electronic       | HDD 80GB                            | MicroSD               | 6.6                 | 2.1                                | 66                              | 305        | 6 x 6 x 12                 | 20                  | jvc.com.au       | 799        |
|            | ✓           |                         | Electronic       | Flash Memory 32GB                   | SDHC                  | 5.3                 | 2.1                                | 69                              | 320        | 6.5 x 7 x 12.5             | 20                  | canon.com.au     | 799        |
|            | ✓           |                         | Electronic       | Memory Card                         | SDHC                  | 6.0                 | 10.0                               | 69                              | 244        | 6 x 4.5 x 12               | 23                  | sanyo.com.au     | 599        |
|            |             |                         | Optical          | HDD 80GB                            | SDHC/SDXC             | 2.2                 | 0.3                                | 67                              | 320        | 6.5 x 6.5 x 12.5           | 70                  | panasonic.com.au | 549        |
|            |             |                         | Electronic       | Flash Memory 16GB                   | SDHC                  | 4.6                 | 0.8                                | 69                              | 278        | 6 x 6.5 x 12.5             | 37                  | canon.com.au     | 449        |
|            |             |                         | Electronic       | HDD 80GB                            | SDHC                  | 7.0                 | 0.5                                | 66                              | 230        | 6 x 6 x 11                 | 39                  | jvc.com.au       | 549        |

The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 20%; Sound quality: 15%; Versatility: 10%; Still photo: 10%; Daylight picture quality: 8%; Artificial light picture quality: 8%; Low light picture quality: 8%; Focus: 8%; Image stabilisation: 8%; Battery: 5%. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2010. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Using accessory shoe.





STORY CHRIS RUGGLES

## Tough and ready

Basic, knockabout cameras still need to cover all the bases. CHOICE outlines those that do.

But pushing them beyond their limits can produce both disappointing and costly results.

The cameras in our What to Buy list, right, are the overall top performers in this test. They may not have all the features of high-end cameras, but they can produce good images and are very versatile. >

### NUTSHELL

>> Rugged, everyday cameras can be a compromise between convenience and image quality.

>> It is possible to buy a versatile, responsive camera that gives good results without being bulky or heavy.

**I**n the season of sun and surf, cameras are everywhere, being tested to their limits. Some on test here are designed to withstand a rougher time than others, particularly those that are water or shock-resistant or both (see Wet 'n' Wild, right), so they should withstand long days on the beach.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Lens** This is arguably the most important part of a camera. Its focal length (or lengths in the case of a zoom) will determine how you can frame your shot. The aperture range determines how much light gets to the sensor and how much depth of field you have to play with.

**Weight and size** People with large or small hands need to get to grips with the camera before buying, because it must be comfortable and the controls should all be accessible or they will become a constant frustration. Relatively heavy cameras, such as the Nikon Coolpix L110 or Olympus SP-600UZ, may be cumbersome to lug around, but if the camera is too light, it can be difficult to hold still. As always, try before you buy.

**Monitor / viewfinder** Clarity and detail are everything. The monitor will be used for both framing and reviewing shots as well as using menus and controls. It's important that it can be seen in low light and bright conditions outdoors. Check for reflections and clarity when zooming in to check the focus of an image. Very few basic cameras have a viewfinder, but

where they do, it should be reasonably accurate and bright enough for you to see the information in it, even in low light.

**Shutter delay** The best of the cameras on test are as fast as some of the more expensive high-end cameras we've tested – but even half a second can seem like an eternity. As you press the shutter button, the camera has to calculate the exposure, find a focus point and move the lens elements and aperture diaphragm before it opens the shutter. You can make this easier for the camera if you half-depress the shutter while framing the shot, but you'll be relying on the camera entirely when going for a grab shot that's gone in a split second.

**Movie** Quality levels are getting better and even enthusiast photographers are using movie functions to augment their still shots. Look for formats that are supported by the editing software you're most likely to use and check for problems when panning or zooming. Sound quality is often overlooked but is very important for video. Noises from the camera when zooming or

focusing are pretty common and can be very distracting.

**Flash** Although all these cameras come with built-in flashes, they tend to be small and lack power – even at five metres, the worst will be struggling to provide enough light. The best will not only expose accurately at this distance, but also provide an even spread of light across the scene.

**Camera controls** should be easy to recognise and basics such as changing program modes should become second nature very quickly. Practice will make a difference, but the camera layout should feel logical to you.



## WHAT TO BUY



## 71% Nikon Coolpix L110

PRICE \$399

Although this camera is relatively bulky and heavy, it's versatile, has 43 megabytes of internal memory and the best overall image quality, as well as equal-best flash performance for the cameras on test. Its long zoom starts at 28mm and extends to 420mm, which makes it good for indoors or landscape photography as well as sports and portraits. Its shutter reacts very quickly and it starts up in about 2.5 seconds, so you're unlikely to miss that fleeting shot.

As with all basic cameras, there are some compromises and a long lens such as this will usually have some faults. There are colour aberrations visible throughout the range, but this doesn't affect the resolution too much and you'd need to be viewing the images at quite large sizes to notice them. Light sensitivity is limited to ISO1600 at 12 megapixels, but you can push to ISO3200 or ISO6400 with the resolution limited to three megapixels, which will limit the size you can print. In addition, images at higher ISO tend to be noisy and there's a reduced ability to resolve detail.

The monitor lacks contrast when reviewing still images, but is better when viewing video. However, using the zoom when shooting video produces scratching and humming noises in the captured audio.

### ! WET 'N' WILD

The rugged cameras listed below have rubber seals to keep out moisture and internal protection against shocks, but it is necessary to remove the battery or memory card occasionally. Even a tiny piece of dust or dirt that gets into a seal can result in a failure. So, robust as the camera may be, you'll need to be very careful in maintaining it properly.

The **Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ2** (\$499) is an OK performer that can take some rough treatment. It's a light, relatively small camera that reacts and starts up quickly.

The others listed below may also be an option if you can get them at a good price. Those with overall scores below 55% aren't listed in the table (page 60), but you can get more details online at [www.choice.com.au/digitalcameras](http://www.choice.com.au/digitalcameras).

Pentax Optio W90; Sony Cyber-shot DSC-TX5; Samsung WP10; Fujifilm FinePix XP10; Olympus µ TOUGH-3000; Olympus µ TOUGH-8010.



## 71% Nikon Coolpix S8000

PRICE \$499

This is a small and versatile camera. It has a 30mm-300mm zoom, which will be useful indoors and outdoors, and 32 megabytes of internal memory. It reacts quickly to the shutter, but takes just over four seconds to start up, which is relatively slow.

Like the Coolpix L110, there are noticeable colour aberrations throughout the zoom range, but this is unlikely to be much of a problem unless you're producing big prints or viewing the images at 100% on screen.

Its monitor is the same size as the Coolpix L110, but is more reflective in bright conditions and lacks brightness in low light. Unfortunately, you can't charge the battery outside the camera, which is inconvenient.

Video tends to be dark in low light conditions and its audio quality is poor.



## 71% Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ2

PRICE \$499

Panasonic calls this a travel camera, and its 25mm-300mm zoom will cover most situations. It's versatile, has 40 megabytes of internal memory and starts up in about 2.5 seconds. Unfortunately, it isn't as quick as some to react to the shutter, taking up to just under half a second, but if you can preset the exposure (half holding down the shutter release button), this time will be greatly reduced.

Images have fewer colour aberrations than the others recommended above, but there are some in wide-angle mode, although this doesn't significantly affect sharpness. Its monitor is a little smaller than the other two and suffers from reflections in bright conditions, as well as a lack of contrast in low light. Video also lacks brightness and contrast in low light.

It's important that your camera's monitor / viewfinder can be seen in low light and bright conditions outdoors

| PRODUCT                       |                   | PERFORMANCE             |                       |                       |                                |                 |                 | SPECIFICATIONS          |                 |              |              |                                   |                   |                              |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Brand / model (in rank order) | Overall score (%) | Image quality score (%) | Ease of use score (%) | Versatility score (%) | Monitor / viewfinder score (%) | Flash score (%) | Movie score (%) | Resolution (megapixels) | Zoom range (mm) | Memory type  | Battery type | Battery must be charged in camera | Monitor size (mm) | Shutter delay (secs, 1m/10m) |
| Nikon Coolpix L110            | 71                | 79                      | 64                    | 72                    | 65                             | 84              | 57              | 12                      | 28 - 420        | SDHC         | AA           | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon Coolpix S8000           | 71                | 78                      | 64                    | 73                    | 58                             | 76              | 66              | 14                      | 30 - 300        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 60 X 45           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ8       | 71                | 76                      | 68                    | 74                    | 61                             | 72              | 68              | 12                      | 25 - 300        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.4 / 0.0                    |
| Canon Digital Ixus 210        | 68                | 65                      | 66                    | 68                    | 72                             | 77              | 73              | 14                      | 24 - 120        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 76 X 43           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon S6000                   | 68                | 68                      | 66                    | 70                    | 54                             | 79              | 70              | 14                      | 28 - 196        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 54 X 40           | 0.4 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FH20      | 68                | 74                      | 64                    | 72                    | 47                             | 72              | 73              | 14                      | 28 - 224        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FH22      | 68                | 77                      | 59                    | 72                    | 48                             | 73              | 67              | 14                      | 28 - 224        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 62 X 42           | 0.7 / 0.0                    |
| Canon Digital Ixus 130        | 67                | 66                      | 64                    | 70                    | 65                             | 67              | 81              | 14                      | 28 - 112        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.4 / 0.0                    |
| Olympus SP-600UZ              | 67                | 70                      | 54                    | 76                    | 62                             | 80              | 70              | 12                      | 28 - 420        | SDHC         | AA           | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.7 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FH1       | 67                | 74                      | 67                    | 72                    | 40                             | 67              | 66              | 12                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.4 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FP3       | 67                | 67                      | 68                    | 73                    | 54                             | 66              | 74              | 14                      | 35 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 63 X 41           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FR2       | 67                | 68                      | 66                    | 79                    | 58                             | 57              | 69              | 14                      | 28 - 128        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-ZR3       | 67                | 70                      | 68                    | 75                    | 48                             | 65              | 67              | 14                      | 25 - 200        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX5V      | 67                | 68                      | 62                    | 69                    | 39                             | 83              | 81              | 10                      | 25 - 250        | SDHC, MS-Duo | Custom       | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.5 / 0.0                    |
| Canon PowerShot SX210 IS      | 66                | 65                      | 65                    | 70                    | 61                             | 63              | 72              | 14                      | 28 - 392        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 66 X 37           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Panasonic Lumix DMC-FH3       | 66                | 65                      | 68                    | 72                    | 46                             | 72              | 68              | 14                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Samsung WB650                 | 66                | 68                      | 61                    | 73                    | 63                             | 73              | 62              | 12                      | 24 - 360        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 61 X 46           | 0.7 / 0.0                    |
| Olympus SP-800UZ              | 65                | 69                      | 55                    | 73                    | 56                             | 83              | 63              | 14                      | 28 - 840        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 65 X 37           | 0.5 / 0.0                    |
| Canon Digital Ixus 105        | 64                | 63                      | 66                    | 66                    | 54                             | 72              | 63              | 12                      | 28 - 112        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Canon PowerShot A3100 IS      | 64                | 62                      | 66                    | 68                    | 51                             | 67              | 73              | 12                      | 35 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon Coolpix S1000pj         | 64                | 66                      | 59                    | 69                    | 51                             | 84              | 55              | 12                      | 28 - 140        | SD           | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.5 / 0.0                    |
| Olympus µ-9010                | 64                | 70                      | 54                    | 66                    | 55                             | 75              | 64              | 14                      | 28 - 280        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 54 X 40           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Pentax Optio W90              | 64                | 63                      | 64                    | 76                    | 48                             | 72              | 63              | 12                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 58 X 34           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Sony Cyber-shot DSC-TX5       | 64                | 66                      | 62                    | 70                    | 47                             | 56              | 80              | 10                      | 25 - 100        | SDHC, MS-Duo | Custom       | No                                | 66 X 37           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Canon PowerShot A3000 IS      | 63                | 64                      | 63                    | 69                    | 47                             | 70              | 64              | 10                      | 35 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.6 / 0.0                    |
| Fujifilm FinePix F80EXR       | 63                | 69                      | 65                    | 74                    | 58                             | 54              | 37              | 12                      | 27 - 270        | SDHC, xD     | Custom       | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon Coolpix L22             | 63                | 65                      | 57                    | 66                    | 50                             | 79              | 61              | 12                      | 37 - 134        | SDHC         | AA           | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.3 / 0.0                    |
| Pentax Optio I-10             | 62                | 62                      | 66                    | 75                    | 46                             | 62              | 56              | 12                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 58 X 34           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Samsung WP10                  | 62                | 65                      | 56                    | 70                    | 45                             | 78              | 59              | 12                      | 35 - 175        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 54 X 40           | 0.5 / 0.0                    |
| GE E1486TW                    | 61                | 61                      | 56                    | 73                    | 52                             | 68              | 59              | 14                      | 28 - 224        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.1 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon Coolpix S4000           | 61                | 63                      | 57                    | 64                    | 45                             | 70              | 65              | 12                      | 27 - 108        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 60 X 45           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |
| Kodak Easyshare M580          | 60                | 69                      | 44                    | 70                    | 43                             | 66              | 66              | 14                      | 28 - 224        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 60 X 45           | 0.6 / 0.0                    |
| Pentax Optio H90              | 60                | 56                      | 68                    | 65                    | 51                             | 51              | 64              | 12                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.0 / 0.0                    |
| Nikon Coolpix S3000           | 60                | 64                      | 57                    | 63                    | 43                             | 72              | 58              | 12                      | 27 - 108        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 54 X 40           | 0.7 / 0.0                    |
| Sony Cyber-shot DSC-W370      | 60                | 67                      | 58                    | 70                    | 46                             | 56              | 51              | 14                      | 34 - 238        | SDHC, MS-Duo | Custom       | No                                | 60 X 45           | 0.5 / 0.0                    |
| Kodak Easyshare M575          | 59                | 69                      | 47                    | 69                    | 35                             | 64              | 58              | 14                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | Yes                               | 60 X 45           | 0.9 / 0.0                    |
| Fujifilm FinePix JX250        | 57                | 59                      | 59                    | 61                    | 37                             | 63              | 53              | 14                      | 28 - 140        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.4 / 0.0                    |
| Fujifilm FinePix JZ500        | 57                | 65                      | 61                    | 65                    | 44                             | 31              | 52              | 14                      | 28 - 280        | SDHC         | Custom       | No                                | 54 X 40           | 0.2 / 0.0                    |

## HOW WE TEST

Camera testing is a complicated and expensive process. To help with the high cost, we share the results with a number of consumer organisations around the world. All the tests are carried out by professional labs in Europe that specialise in photographic testing and are particularly exacting. All image quality appraisals are done with the camera in auto mode to ensure the tester isn't influencing the outcome.

**Image quality** Our testers report on colour accuracy and saturation, sharpness, resolution, noise levels, distortion and vignetting in both normal and low light situations.

**Ease of use** A five-person panel evaluates each camera's manual, monitor, data transfer and shutter delay. They also look at common tasks, such as inserting and removing the memory card and changing menu settings.

**Versatility** includes an evaluation of the camera's lens, memory, sensitivity adjustment (ISO), white balance, shutter speeds, exposure options, viewfinder/monitor size and adjustment. Functions we check for include easy image deletion, red eye reduction, different focusing options and audio/video connections and how long it takes before the camera is ready to take a photo.

**Monitor / viewfinder** This score measures the difference between the image displayed in the viewfinder/monitor and what is recorded on the final image, how clear the image is and, particularly for monitors, how much reflection there is in bright conditions.

**Flash** Our testers check the flash's ability to produce enough light and even illumination at one, three and five metres.

**Movie quality** Cameras that are able to record video are set to their highest-quality movie setting and then scored on resolution of detail, fluency of playback, picture noise and pixelation caused by compression. This is done in both bright light and low light conditions, as well as in macro mode where possible. The sound quality is also scored, and we check for noises caused by the cameras when focusing or zooming.

**USING THE TABLE** The overall score is made up of: Image quality: 35%; Ease of use: 25%; Versatility: 10%; Monitor/viewfinder: 10%; Flash: 10%; Movie: 10%. **Resolution** This calculation is based on the maximum number of pixels the camera uses to create an image. **Zoom range** A 35mm-equivalent figure indicates a range comparable to a 35mm film-based camera. **Memory type** **CF:** Compact Flash, xD, xD card. **SDHC:** Secure Digital High Capacity card is an extension of the SD card format with a larger capacity up to 32GB, and looks exactly the same as an SD card. **MS-Duo:** Memory Stick Duo. **Battery type** Most custom batteries are rechargeable Li-Ion or Lithium Polymer (Li-po). None of the cameras that take custom batteries can also use normal alkaline batteries. Those specifying "AA" can use alkaline, lithium or rechargeable AA batteries. **Monitor size** The viewable area. **Shutter delay** The time it takes from the moment the shutter button is pressed to the moment the picture is taken. A time is included to indicate the delay when focusing on a subject at close (1m) or medium range (10m). **Startup time** The time delay between turning on the camera and being ready to take a photo. **Delay - sequential shots (single mode)** The time between shots when the camera is in single shot mode. **Delay - sequential shots (continuous mode)** The time between shots when the camera is in continuous shot mode. **ISO range** Light sensitivity equivalent to 35mm film. **Video resolution** The highest detail format available; many cameras will have a number of smaller formats as well. **Dimensions** include all protruding parts when the camera is switched off. **Weight** includes batteries, memory cards and neck strap if supplied. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2010.

| Delay - sequential shots (secs, single mode) | Delay - sequential shots (secs, continuous mode) | ISO range  | Video resolution (pixels) | Dimensions (cm, W x H x D) | Weight (g) | Price (\$) |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------|------------|
| 2.9                                          | 2.0                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 7.5 x 8.5             | 499        | 399        |
| 2.3                                          | 1.1                                              | 100 - 3200 | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 6.5 x 3               | 184        | 499        |
| 2.1                                          | 0.4                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10.5 x 6.5 x 3.5           | 210        | 499        |
| 3.5                                          | 1.2                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.2               | 163        | 399        |
| 2.1                                          | 1.1                                              | 100 - 3200 | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.5               | 156        | 399        |
| 2.3                                          | 0.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 3                 | 159        | 299        |
| 2.0                                          | 0.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 3                 | 162        | 349        |
| 3.2                                          | 1.2                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 9.5 x 6 x 1.8              | 135        | 319        |
| 2.9                                          | 0.8                                              | 100 - 1600 | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 7.5 x 8               | 478        | 299        |
| 2.5                                          | 0.8                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.4               | 147        | 199        |
| 2.4                                          | 0.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6.5 x 1.9             | 143        | 249        |
| 2.1                                          | 0.4                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10.5 x 6.5 x 2.5           | 191        | 499        |
| 2.4                                          | 0.4                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10.5 x 6 x 3               | 163        | 599        |
| 2.1                                          | 0.1                                              | 125 - 3200 | 1920 x 1080               | 10.5 x 6.5 x 3             | 204        | 579        |
| 2.8                                          | 1.2                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 6.5 x 3.5             | 216        | 499        |
| 2.3                                          | 0.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.4               | 149        | 249        |
| 2.7                                          | 1.2                                              | 80 - 3200  | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 6.5 x 3.5             | 240        | 499        |
| 3.1                                          | 1.2                                              | 64 - 6400  | 1280 x 720                | 11 x 7.5 x 9               | 444        | 599        |
| 3.1                                          | 1.0                                              | 80 - 1600  | 640 x 480                 | 9.5 x 6 x 2.1              | 139        | 219        |
| 2.5                                          | 1.1                                              | 80 - 1600  | 640 x 480                 | 10 x 6 x 3                 | 156        | 149        |
| 2.7                                          | 2.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 640 x 480                 | 10.5 x 7 x 2.3             | 179        | 499        |
| 4.4                                          | 1.0                                              | 64 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 9.5 x 6 x 3.5              | 174        | 299        |
| 2.6                                          | 1.6                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 11.5 x 6 x 2.5             | 163        | 449        |
| 1.9                                          | 0.1                                              | 125 - 3200 | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 1.9               | 146        | 499        |
| 3.0                                          | 1.4                                              | 100 - 1600 | 640 x 480                 | 10 x 6 x 3                 | 156        | 199        |
| 1.7                                          | 0.5                                              | 100 - 1600 | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6.5 x 3               | 205        | 399        |
| 4.4                                          | 1.1                                              | 80 - 1600  | 640 x 480                 | 10 x 6.5 x 3               | 192        | 129        |
| 2.4                                          | 1.8                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 7 x 3                 | 156        | 349        |
| 3.9                                          | 1.1                                              | 80 - 3200  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6.5 x 2.3             | 141        | 249        |
| 3.4                                          | 0.8                                              | 80 - 3200  | 1280 x 720                | 10.5 x 6 x 2.5             | 153        | 299        |
| 2.8                                          | 1.4                                              | 80 - 3200  | 1280 x 720                | 9.5 x 6 x 2.1              | 133        | 249        |
| 5.3                                          | 1.0                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6.5 x 3               | 165        | 249        |
| 2.4                                          | 1.5                                              | 80 - 1600  | 1280 x 720                | 9.5 x 6 x 2.5              | 131        | 149        |
| 2.6                                          | 1.3                                              | 80 - 3200  | 640 x 480                 | 9.5 x 6 x 2                | 115        | 199        |
| 2.2                                          | 0.7                                              | 80 - 3200  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 3                 | 175        | 299        |
| 2.8                                          | 0.7                                              | 64 - 1000  | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.5               | 146        | 199        |
| 2.5                                          | 0.6                                              | 100 - 1600 | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.4               | 128        | 149        |
| 2.8                                          | 0.8                                              | 100 - 1600 | 1280 x 720                | 10 x 6 x 2.4               | 161        | 299        |



STORY CHRIS BARNES

## The road less travelled

Most car GPS units have cities and towns well covered, but some could lead you seriously astray on country roads.

dedicated car GPS unit. Features such as lane guidance, announcement of school zones and text to speech (see What to Look For, page 64) are standard in most models.

### Town vs country

Because all units perform well in the city, we've simplified the city driving component of our test. As well as checking city performance, we've added a test of regional centres, covering towns and other residential areas outside the big smoke. All the units have excellent performance >

### NUTSHELL

>> On test: 15 car GPS devices priced from \$129 to \$649.  
>> All perform well in our city and regional tests, but rural performance varies considerably, depending on which map provider is used.

**C**ar GPS units are popular purchases, and little wonder – their features are growing as their price tags drop. Close to 860,000 units were sold in Australia over the 12 months to June, a increase of 2% over the previous year – yet retailer revenue from those sales declined by 15%. So Australians are buying more units at cheaper prices. And while GPS-capable smartphones such as the iPhone are making some inroads into the GPS market, it seems most drivers still prefer the full functionality of a

### HOW WE TEST

**City** For this test, only bench tests were carried out in Sydney, as past results in various cities showed very little difference between models in built-up areas in terms of distances and arrival times. Our tester, Peter Horvath, selects 10 locations from all over Sydney and performs two sets of distance calculations for each location, one from Engadine and the other from Ingleburn. The total of the predicted distances is calculated; the more accurate the predicted distance, the better the score.

**Regional** Peter selects a variety of street addresses – house/lot number, street name and town name – on the south coast of NSW, to find out if the GPS provides accurate directions.

**Rural** He selects a combination of wineries and hotels from the most recent *Hunter Valley Tourist Guide* to find out if the GPS provides accurate directions. Only locations with a proper street address shown in the

guide are selected – that is, house/lot number, street name and town name.

**Ease of use** Peter assesses how useful the instructions are, how easy it is to attach and remove the GPS from the windscreen and whether it vibrates during driving. He looks at how easy it is to use the menu structure on the touchscreen and, where supplied, whether it is necessary to use a stylus to make entries.

**Verbal instructions** are assessed by listening to the quality of the voice, timing of turn and other instructions, specificity of the instructions, and whether it's possible to rely on verbal instructions alone without looking at the screen.

**Screen quality** Peter compares how easy it is to read the map and how clear the picture is in daylight and at night.

**Points of interest (POI)** He selects 20 points of interests, including a

hospital, medical centre, airport, police station, shopping centre, tourist attraction and so on, and rates the models based on how many POIs are found all over Australia and the accuracy of the information supplied.

**Speed of map refresh** He checks how long it takes the GPS to recover after a missed turn and after coming out of a tunnel, with a planned turn-off immediately after the tunnel exit.

**Durability** He checks the systems after three hours in a temperature-controlled oven at 60°C, to simulate being in a car on a hot summer's day.





## WHAT TO BUY

**87%** TomTom  
XXL 540S

PRICE \$329

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Excellent screen in daylight and at night-time.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.

## BAD POINTS

- Slow to recover after a missed turn.
- No printed manual.

**86%** Garmin  
nüvi 1450T

PRICE \$349

## GOOD POINTS

- Excellent screen in daylight and at night-time.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.
- Preloaded maps of Australia and New Zealand.
- SUNA included.

## BAD POINTS

- No printed manual.

**86%** TomTom  
Go 950

PRICE \$649

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Excellent screen in daylight and at night-time.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.
- Voice recognition.
- Preloaded maps of Australia, New Zealand, Europe, US and Canada.

## BAD POINTS

- Slow to recover after a missed turn.
- Slight shaking on rough roads.
- No printed manual.

**86%** TomTom  
Go 750

PRICE \$399

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Excellent screen in daylight and at night-time.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.
- Voice recognition.

## BAD POINTS

- Slow to recover after a missed turn.
- Slight shaking on rough roads.
- No printed manual.

**85%** Garmin  
nüvi 1690

PRICE \$499

## GOOD POINTS

- Good screen in daylight and at night-time.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.
- Preloaded maps of Australia and New Zealand.

## BAD POINTS

- No printed manual.

**85%** Uniden  
Trax 4310

PRICE \$229

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Preloaded maps of Australia and New Zealand.
- Good indication of roads and route (although some text is too small).
- Excellent manual.

## BAD POINTS

- Predictive text input is a bit slow.
- Screen is shiny and lacks contrast.
- Slight shaking on rough roads.

**84%** TomTom  
XL 250

PRICE \$249

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Excellent screen in daylight.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.

## BAD POINTS

- Screen does not change automatically between day and night modes and brightness is not adjustable in night mode.
- No printed manual.

**83%** Go Cruise  
GPS4300-A

PRICE \$129 (on sale at Aldi, 16 December 2010; promotion only)

## GOOD POINTS

- Equal-best range of POI.
- Preloaded maps of Australia and New Zealand.
- Good indication of roads and route (although some text is too small).

## BAD POINTS

- Screen is too shiny in daylight.
- Fiddly to adjust the windscreen mount.

BEST  
BUY**82%** Garmin  
nüvi 3790T

PRICE \$549

## GOOD POINTS

- Excellent screen in daylight.
- Very good screen in night-time.
- Preloaded maps of Australia and New Zealand.
- Excellent indication of roads and route with good sized text.

## BAD POINTS

- Very slow to recover after a missed turn.
- No printed manual.



Once again  
with car  
GPS, it's  
performance  
in the  
country that  
separates the  
wheat from  
the chaff

< in this test. If you do all your driving in cities or large towns, base your decision on price, features and ease of use.

But it's the country that sorts the wheat from the chaff. As usual, we also test performance in a rural area and, as in previous tests, this shows the biggest performance variations. The Navman, Navigon and Voxson models don't perform well in this test and so are not included in our What to Buy list (page 63). This is almost certainly not due to the units themselves, but rather the map data they use. They all use Navteq maps, while the recommended models use Whereis maps, which appear to be more up to date and detailed for most rural and regional areas. (The odd one out is the Navig8r i50, which uses Metroview (PSMA) maps; it performs well in all the tests, although not quite as well overall as the recommended models, and has the added bonus of free lifetime map updates.)

Even so, rural areas can be challenging for any GPS map; we did some experimental testing in 2009 in the country near Warwick in southern Queensland and found that a TomTom unit (using Whereis maps) found only two of 29 locations, while a Mio unit (Navteq) found only three. Nevertheless, for on-road travel outside of cities and large towns, you're generally better off with a GPS loaded with Whereis maps. ■

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Routing options** You can program the GPS to exclude toll roads, unsealed roads or highways from the calculated route.

**Announces school zones** provides warnings when approaching a school zone where speed limits are reduced. Some models announce when you're approaching a school, while others simply show up as a speed alert.

**Full-route display** Most car GPS devices project this as a line on the map from your existing position through to your destination.

**Lane guidance** tells you when to move to the exit lane and displays complex multi-lane manoeuvres clearly.

**Walking mode** allows you to plot a route for pedestrians, such as taking a short-cut through a park or walking in the wrong direction down a one-way street.

**Text to speech (TTS)** The GPS device announces the street name so you know when to turn without having to glance at the screen. Some models provide more than one voice option, which can be handy if you don't like the default voice.

| PRODUCT                          | PERFORMANCE       | FEATURES                                                |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Brand / model<br>(in rank order) | Overall score (%) | City performance score (%)                              |
| TomTom XXL 540S                  | 87                | 85                                                      |
| Garmin nüvi 1450T                | 86                | 95                                                      |
| TomTom Go 950                    | 86                | 85                                                      |
| TomTom Go 750                    | 86                | 85                                                      |
| Garmin nüvi 1690                 | 85                | 95                                                      |
| Uniden Tra x 4310                | 85                | 90                                                      |
| TomTom XL 250                    | 84                | 85                                                      |
| Go Cruise GPS4300-A              | 83                | 90                                                      |
| Garmin nüvi 3790T                | 82                | 80                                                      |
| Navig8r i50 GPS                  | 77                | 90                                                      |
| Navman MY75T                     | 76                | 80                                                      |
| Navman EZY40                     | 75                | 80                                                      |
| Navman MY60T                     | 75                | 80                                                      |
| Navigon 70 Plus                  | 70                | 95                                                      |
| Voxson GPS900                    | 62                | 90                                                      |
|                                  |                   | Regional performance score (%)                          |
|                                  |                   | Rural performance score (%)                             |
|                                  |                   | Ease of use score (%)                                   |
|                                  |                   | Verbal instructions score (%)                           |
|                                  |                   | Screen quality score (%)                                |
|                                  |                   | Points of interest score (%)                            |
|                                  |                   | Speed of map refresh score (%)                          |
|                                  |                   | Routing options: No tolls/No unsealed roads/No highways |
|                                  |                   | Announces school zones                                  |
|                                  |                   | Full-route display                                      |
|                                  |                   | Lane guidance                                           |
|                                  |                   | Walking mode                                            |

**USING THE TABLE Scores** The overall score is made up of: In-car performance: 50% (city 15% / regional 15% / rural 15% / speed of map refresh 5%); Ease of use: 15%; Verbal instructions: 15%; Screen quality: 10%; Points of interest: 10%. For more, see How We Test, page 62. **Features** See What to Look For, above.

**Remote trip planning** allows you to run through your driving route in virtual mode before you even get into the car (also known as A-B routing).

**Bluetooth** Some units can communicate with Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones, allowing you to make

hands-free phone calls and call directly by selecting certain POIs.

**Trip log** takes note of your travels and saves the information to post online in an application such as Google Earth.

**SUNA** allows you to collect live traffic information out of the box with a SUNA subscription integrated into the car GPS unit, or as an optional extra. Five models on test include this and a further five offer it as an option.

#### Mac compatibility

If you want to use your car GPS on a computer, all models on test provide some

functionality on a Windows (XP

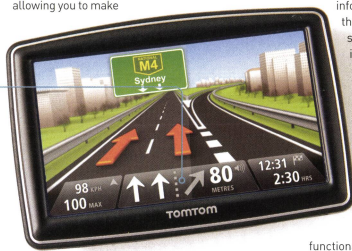
or Vista) machine. However, the Navman, Navig8r and Go Cruise (Aldi) models do not offer support for Apple Mac OSX.

**Claimed battery life** This provides a comparative indication as to whether you can use the unit without plugging it in for short trips, or take it when you require guidance while walking.

**Ready to navigate** is the time measured from the moment our tester turns on the unit until enough satellites have been located to provide a position. This time is a comparative measure only and may differ depending on the user location and satellite positions.

**Memory cards** may contain the latest maps and can also store images, music and video files.

**NZ map support** Most models allow you to add maps for travelling in NZ – however, some include the maps with the original purchase, which can save you \$100 or more.



#### SPECIFICATIONS

| Remote trip planning | Wide screen | Bluetooth | MP3 player | Photo/ Video/ Ebook | Trip log | SUNA included | Claimed battery life (hours) | NZ Map support | Mac support OSX | Map provider | Ready to navigate (sec) | Map update cost (\$) | Memory card type | Dimensions (mm, H x W x D) | Screen dimensions (mm, W x H) | Weight (g) | Contact        | Price (\$) |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|---------------------|----------|---------------|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | (A)           | 3                            | (A)            | ✓               | Whereis      | 34                      | 100                  | na               | 90 x 135 x 25              | 112 x 64                      | 203        | tomtom.com     | 329        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓             | 3                            | ✓              | ✓               | Whereis      | 44                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 85 x 135 x 16              | 110 x 63                      | 228        | garmin.com.au  | 349        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | (A)           | 3                            | ✓              | ✓               | Whereis      | 35                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 85 x 127 x 22              | 96 x 55                       | 200        | tomtom.com     | 649        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | (A)           | 3                            | (A)            | ✓               | Whereis      | 35                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 85 x 127 x 22              | 96 x 55                       | 205        | tomtom.com     | 399        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | ✓             | 3                            | ✓              | ✓               | Whereis      | 38                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 78 x 125 x 14              | 95 x 54                       | 177        | garmin.com.au  | 499        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | ns            | 3                            | ✓              | ns              | Whereis      | 37                      | 96                   | SD               | 80 x 128 x 16              | 95 x 54                       | 189        | uniden.com.au  | 229        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | ns            | 3                            | (A)            | ✓               | Whereis      | 34                      | 100                  | na               | 80 x 120 x 26              | 95 x 55                       | 158        | tomtom.com     | 249        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓             | 3                            | ✓              | ✓               | Whereis      | 55                      | ns                   | Micro SD         | 74 x 112 x 13              | 95 x 54                       | 134        | aldi.com.au    | 129        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | ✓             | 4                            | ✓              | ns              | Whereis      | 44                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 72 x 122 x 9               | 93 x 56                       | 116        | garmin.com.au  | 549        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓             | 2.5                          | (A)            | ✓               | Metroview    | 75                      | Free                 | Micro SD         | 84 x 139 x 12              | 112 x 64                      | 164        | navig8r.com.au | 189        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓             | 2                            | (A)            | ✓               | Navteq       | 40                      | 99                   | Micro SD         | 88 x 141 x 17              | 110 x 64                      | 189        | navman.com.au  | 399        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | (A)           | 2                            | (A)            | ✓               | Navteq       | 42                      | 99                   | Micro SD         | 82 x 126 x 15              | 95 x 55                       | 149        | navman.com.au  | 199        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | ✓             | 2                            | (A)            | ✓               | Navteq       | 41                      | 99                   | Micro SD         | 85 x 135 x 15              | 105 x 60                      | 171        | navman.com.au  | 249        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ✓        | (A)           | 3                            | ✓              | ✓               | Navteq       | 45                      | 99(B)                | Micro SD         | 83 x 137 x 18              | 112 x 64                      | 184        | navigon.com    | 329        |
| ✓                    | ✓           | ✓         | ✓          | ✓                   | ns       | ns            | ns                           | ✓              | ns              | Navteq       | 42                      | 100                  | Micro SD         | 68 x 122 x 13              | 95 x 53                       | 158        | voxxson.com.au | 249        |

Recommened retail, as of October 2010. **TABLE NOTES** ns Not supplied. (A) Optional. (B) Free updates every three months for two years, then \$99 for another two-year subscription.



STORY REBECCA GATTO

## Kitchen keepers

Dozens of utensils claim to make cooking easier. But are they really necessary or just cupboard clutter?

### NUTSHELL

>> It's easy to get carried away when it comes to buying kitchen utensils, but which ones do you really need?

>> We call on the expertise of our Home Economist, Fiona Mair, to put some common kitchen tools to the test and share some tips and tricks.

**I**n an age of time-poor cooking, many kitchen utensils claim to make the process quicker and less daunting. Yet some, despite looking flashy, provide little practical assistance. You don't need every utensil on the market, but, teamed with some basic cooking skills, the right tools can make cooking simple and more enjoyable.

CHOICE members often ask us to report on the essential tools they need for their kitchens. Drawing on more than 25 years of cooking experience, our Home Economist, Fiona Mair, sheds some light on some necessary – and not-so-necessary – kitchen utensils. >

### MEET OUR EXPERT

**Fiona Mair** is Home Economist at CHOICE. She has 25 years' cooking experience and certainly knows her way around a kitchen. "Let's face it, not all of us have the skills to be a master chef," says Fiona. "But with the essential kitchen utensils, cooking can be so much easier."



### FOOD THERMOMETER

**A**s well as ensuring meat is perfectly cooked, a thermometer can be an aid to food safety. Undercooked meat can contain harmful bacteria.

Some thermometers are oven-proof and remain in the meat as it cooks, while others are inserted at regular intervals. Place the thermometer in the thickest part of the meat, away from bone, fat and gristle, as these areas hold the most heat. Because meat isn't uniform in shape, take readings in at least two places.

The NSW Food Authority suggests cooking fish to a temperature of 65°C, minced meat and sausages to 71°C and whole roast poultry to 82°C.

### CHOPPING BOARD

**C**hopping boards can harbour harmful bacteria and pose a risk of cross-contamination if they're not properly cleaned or if raw foods containing bacteria come in contact with other food.

They come in four materials – plastic, wood, marble and glass. No matter which type you use, you're less likely to cross-contaminate if you thoroughly wash and sanitise your boards after using them and follow food safety practices. Have at least a couple of boards on hand – one for raw meat and fish and another for fruit and vegetables. Colour-code or mark them so that you don't mix them up.

Chopping boards cost anywhere from \$10 to more than \$100 for a designer model.

- **Plastic chopping boards** It's easy to find a set of colour-coded plastic chopping boards and they're relatively inexpensive. Fiona found that some foods slip on plastic boards and also stain the surface. Knives can also leave cut marks on the board, which become a place for bacteria to hide. To clean, wash in hot, soapy water. The hot-rinse cycle on your dishwasher will also help sterilise the board.
- **Glass/marble boards** can cause a knife to slip, posing a safety hazard, and also damage your knives. If you're really keen on glass or marble, look for a board with non-slip feet. Use glass boards for food presentation rather than preparation.
- **Wooden boards** are the way to go. They don't move around on the bench and are knife-friendly and durable, provided you look after them. Wash your wooden board in warm, soapy water. To deodorise the board, rub a lemon over its surface.



## MANDOLIN/V-SLICER

**T**his gadget is used to cut firm fruit and vegetables, in thick or thin slices, and to dice, chip and julienne. While most mandolins, or V-slicers, come in heavy-duty plastic, they're also available in more expensive and heavier stainless steel. Some have a convenient container underneath, into which the cut food falls, while others sit on a chopping board and

are kept stable with rubber feet. They also come with safety holders to protect your fingers from the extremely sharp blades.

We give the **Ergo Mandoline Powerlance** (\$45, right, from [www.kitchengadgets.com.au](http://www.kitchengadgets.com.au)) three stars out of five. According to Fiona, V-slicers add a creative touch



to food preparation. She recommends the Powerlance to those who aren't confident using a knife or who don't have a food processor.

## VEGETABLE PEELER

**F**or such a simple utensil, vegetable peelers come in an amazing array of designs and materials. A good peeler is versatile, comfortable to hold and indestructible – if it can peel the skin from a butternut pumpkin, it's a keeper.

Fiona's favourite peeler is the **Culinare Swivel Peeler C12009** (\$5, right). It's the cheapest of those we looked at and available in most supermarkets. She found it peels all vegetables with ease, including tomatoes and pumpkin, due to its swivel-action blade that conforms to the contours of the vegetable.



## CAN-OPENER

**W**hile most cans have ring pulls nowadays, it's surprising how many still don't, so a good can-opener remains a kitchen essential. Look for one with a dial that's easy to grip and a comfortable handle, preferably plastic, as metal can-openers can be hard-edged and require strength to attach to the can.

We looked at three different can-openers,

ranging in price from \$4 to \$24, and found that the cheapest, the **Zyliss Essentials Safety Can Opener 9920373** (\$4, right) rated highest. It has a comfortable handle that's easy to attach to the can and little effort is required to turn the dial knob. No sharp edges are left around the rim once the top is removed. The Zyliss Essentials can-opener is available from Target.



## GARLIC CRUSHER

**T**his is one kitchen gadget you can possibly do without, as it's often easier just to chop the garlic with a knife or use a microplane grater (see Other Utensils, page 68). We looked at three types:

- **Vibe Rolling Garlic Chopper** (\$14.94; image n/a). This rolls over your benchtop to chop the garlic. It's difficult to start the chopping process and, once it has started, the garlic is pushed to the edges away from the blades. This leaves it only roughly chopped and getting it out of the blades is a nuisance.
- **Culinare Garlic Press C12010** (\$12; below, left). This press accommodates one or two cloves of garlic. We found the garlic needs to be scraped off the press and often blocks the holes.
- **Vibe Garlic Machine V-GM-130** (\$29.96; below, right). This crusher accommodates up to eight peeled cloves of garlic. It also acts as storage for any unused garlic. However, the handle is awkward to twist and you need to clean the unit afterwards.





Place your rolling pin in the fridge for a while, then dust with flour to stop pastry sticking to it

## OTHER UTENSILS

**Pepper grinder** Look for one with an adjustable grind, from fine to coarse.

**Vegetable shredder** This gives professional results and is great if you don't have a food processor.

**Citrus juicer** A plastic juicer with a jug attached is best. Look for one that traps the seeds and some of the pith, and is easy to clean. To get the most juice out of your citrus, roll it first on your bench, applying pressure.

**Knives** come in a variety of sizes, weights and handle types – try them out first to see which suit you best. Look for a knife that is well-balanced and fully forged (the metal of the blade runs right through to the handle).

See our online review at [www.choice.com.au/kitchenknives](http://www.choice.com.au/kitchenknives).

**Microplane** This can be expensive, but it will give you a very fine grate of garlic and cheese, for example. You can get microplanes in fine and coarse grades. They are quick and effortless to use – but take care not to grate your fingers in the process.

**Box grater** provides a coarser grate than a microplane. Look for one that's stainless steel, with a comfortable handle, that will sit sturdily on your bench. See our online review at [www.choice.com.au/graters](http://www.choice.com.au/graters).

**Strainer** This is inexpensive and a must-have for cooking noodles or

pasta. It's handy to have three sizes – small, medium and large.

**Corkscrew** While most wines now come in screw-top bottles, a corkscrew is not yet totally redundant.

**Rolling pin** If you regularly make pizza dough or shortcrust pastry, look for a rolling pin that's slightly heavy and about 30cm wide. Before using, put it in the fridge for a while, then dust with flour. This should stop the pastry sticking to the pin.

**Pastry brush** is for basting, marinating, glazing and greasing. They come with bristle, nylon or silicon brushes, or you can make your own by tying together a bunch of herbs.

## MEAT POUNDER

**K**itchen hammers tenderise meat by breaking down its tough fibres. While they are available in wood, metal or plastic, we recommend a metal type, which should last a lifetime. Look for a hammer that's double-sided – one side flat for tender cuts of meat, the other notched for tenderising thicker cuts.



## POTATO MASHER

**A** potato masher should be comfortable to hold, with a large surface area and small holes. This device will be enough to give you a fine mash.

If you want a creamier, smoother texture, beating the mixture with a wooden or other large spoon gives the best results.

For a finer, fluffier consistency, invest in a potato ricer (left), which is like a large-scale garlic press in that you squeeze the two handles together

to force the potato through small, sieve-like holes. You can also use it to finely mash other fruit and vegetables. However, it requires a little strength on the part of the user.

Clean your masher or ricer straight after use. Rinse it under cold water to remove leftover potato, then wash in warm soapy water. Potato is a starchy food, and using hot water bakes the starch onto the masher, making it more difficult to clean (bear this in mind, too, when cleaning your saucepan).

## OVEN MITTS

**T**hese protective gloves are commonly available in either cloth or silicon – but both materials have their pitfalls.

Cloth mitts generally protect your entire hand and wrist from heat and splatters, but they can be clumsy to use and lifting some cookware with them can be awkward. They can also stain easily, and hot liquid can quickly penetrate through the glove, burning your skin.

Silicon mitts, on the other hand, grip well, can be easier to handle and can also withstand high temperatures. However, most silicon mitts only protect your hands, leaving your wrists and arms vulnerable.





STORY MARTHA PSIROUKIS

## Freezing out bad performers

Fridges are becoming more energy-efficient, but is this at a cost to healthy food storage?

### NUTSHELL

>> We've revised our fridge test method and rating scale to bring the spotlight back onto keeping food fresh.

>> Six new refrigerators are on test, with one making the cut for our What to Buy list.

**E**nergy consumption by fridges has improved dramatically over the past decade, but unfortunately energy efficiency gains have led to poor food storage in some cases.

One way fridges save on energy is by having longer "compressor-off cycles", which causes the temperature inside to fluctuate. Ice-cream is a good indicator of temperature fluctuation, as it can partially melt during the off cycle, then form gritty crystals when it refreezes.

According to the NSW Department of Climate Change and Water, \$2.5 billion worth of food is thrown away every year – or about \$1000 per household in NSW alone. CHOICE believes one reason for this wastage is fridges not being set to the optimum temperatures of 3°C in the fresh food compartment and -18°C in the freezer.

To check whether your fridge is cooling as it should, buy a food or fridge thermometer – or one for each compartment – from a kitchen or catering supply shop, hardware or electrical store, and monitor temperatures in the fresh-food and freezer sections. A fridge should be able to achieve -18°C and 3°C simultaneously in those two different compartments. If your fridge has problems reaching or maintaining these temperatures, contact the manufacturer.

Your fridge will most likely give you some control over setting correct temperatures. But you have no control over large temperature swings or poor temperature uniformity, and CHOICE has found many fridges that aren't up to the job. Poor uniformity may mean, for example, an average temperature of 3°C in the fresh food compartment while other parts, such as the door shelf, have a temperature of more than 5°C, resulting in off milk much more quickly than you would expect.

To bring the spotlight back onto a fridge's fundamental function of keeping food fresh, we've revised our testing method and adjusted our rating scale. Our main focus is now on temperature performance – see How We Test, page 71, for details. >

### WHAT TO BUY

These are the best fridges in each size range, with minimum scores of 60% for all factors that make up temperature performance except the recommended setting score. (This is because you can change the recommended setting to get a better result.) Best Buys are top performers with a good reliability rating that are relatively cheap to buy and run. Where possible, we've included both top (T) and bottom (B) freezers in relevant size categories.

For profiles of the models in the What to Buy list, see the relevant CHOICE issue as indicated next to each model, or go online to [www.choice.com.au/](http://www.choice.com.au/) fridges.

#### 300L-380L

**Fisher & Paykel** E381T (T) [May 06] \$1149

**Westinghouse** WBM3700WB (B) [May 09] \$1269

BEST BUY

#### 381L-450L

**NEW Fisher & Paykel** E442B (B) \$1589

**Fisher & Paykel** E406B (T) [May 09] \$1649

#### 451L-525L

**Fisher & Paykel** E521T (T) [Nov 06] \$2339

**Westinghouse** WBM5100WB (B) [Sept 09] \$1899

BEST BUY

#### MORE THAN 525L, INCLUDING FRENCH DOOR

**Fisher & Paykel** RF610A (FD) [Nov 07] \$3599

#### SIDE-BY-SIDE

**Westinghouse** WSE6100WA [Nov 05] \$1899

B = Freezer on bottom.

T = Freezer on top.

FD = French doors.

Fresh food shelves should be easy to remove and replace, and the range of shelf positions should suit your needs

## WHAT TO BUY



## 78% Fisher & Paykel E442B (Medium 381L-450L)

PRICE \$1589

### GOOD POINTS

- Excellent temperature range.
- Very good compartment uniformity.
- Very good temperatures at the recommended control setting.
- Controls are easy to use.
- Has a door alarm.
- Relatively very quiet.

### BAD POINTS

- No chiller.
- Only OK for temperature fluctuations as the compressor stops and starts.



### LG IS COOL AGAIN

We tested the LG GC-L1975TF, which is from the same series as the LG GC-L197NFS from our Uncool Behaviour story (see *CHOICE*, April 2010). This time round, we found no energy-saving mode in this new model. It performed well overall, achieving a very good temperature range; it is very energy-efficient and relatively quiet. On the downside, its fresh food compartment can get a little too warm in summer, meaning you'll have to adjust the controls, and it doesn't have a chiller.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Freezer location** Top-mount freezers are generally cheaper and more energy-efficient. Bottom-mount freezers have their fresh-food compartment at a more accessible height. Side-by-side models tend to have narrow and deep compartments, which can make them difficult to reach into and restricts storage options (we couldn't fit a frozen pizza flat in some), but the narrow doors take up less space in the kitchen when open. The tall compartments of side-by-sides can make the even distribution of cold air difficult throughout the fridge and freezer, particularly at the top. When installing a side-by-side model, cabinets tend to twist unless you're very careful about height adjustment.

**A chiller** is important for storing meat, fish and poultry (fresh or cooked) at a safe temperature for longer. If you're choosing a fridge with a chiller, its temperature should be close to zero and ideally have a separate temperature control.

**Crisper** Look for a well-sealed crisper drawer to keep vegetables fresh; check that the fridge's air outlets don't blow onto it, as this will dry food out faster.

A good crisper means you don't have to put your fruit and veggies in plastic bags. A fridge with one crisper drawer is usually the full width of the fridge; two crispers are half the width each, but occasionally you'll find a wider and a narrower one.

**A dairy compartment** is convenient for keeping butter and hard cheeses slightly soft.

**Fresh food shelves** should be easy to remove and replace, and the range of shelf positions should suit your needs. Can you stand soft-drink or wine bottles in the door shelves? Split shelves can be handy for this. The shelf number listed in the table (page 72) is for removable shelves. You'll have extra storage space from the crisper lids/shelves or deli/snack box lids.

**Rollers** are useful for moving the fridge easily and cleaning behind it. It should also have adjustable feet (or rollers) for levelling the fridge. Four rollers are better than two, provided they have brakes or adjustable feet to secure the fridge in place.

**Removable shelves** Having all shelves able to be removed when the door is open at 90° is important for access and cleaning when your fridge has to be positioned with the door hinge next to a wall.

**Door hinge** Be sure to buy a fridge with a door hinge position that suits your kitchen layout. If you tend to move house a lot, opt for a door/hinge that is reversible (i.e. can be switched to swing from right to left or left to right), though you may have to buy a kit and/or call in a service person to do this.

choice shopper

For the best deal, call CHOICE Shopper, 1300 360 655, with the model name and number, the price you want to beat and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

The full range of models on test may not be available in all states.

## ABOUT THE REST

## LESS THAN 300L

The **Westinghouse WTB2300WB-XAU** has small temperature fluctuations, but it's only OK overall and for temperature performance. It's poor for ambient change, meaning you'll have to alter the control settings in winter and summer. And although its range score is good, it can't achieve -15°C while keeping the fresh food cold enough, which will be a problem for people who want to keep their ice cream scoopable and their milk fresh at the same time.

## MEDIUM (381L-450L)

The **Fisher & Paykel E440T** is a good performer with very good temperature uniformity. It has a door alarm and controls that are easy to adjust, although they can be difficult to reach. However, its temperature fluctuations as the compressor stops and starts are a bit large, it has no chiller and the freezer gets too warm in winter.

The **Kelvinator KTM3900WB-R\*7** has handy slide-out glass shelves, excellent temperature options, and maintains very uniform temperatures. But it's mediocre

for temperature fluctuations, has no chiller and the freezer gets too warm in winter.

## LARGE (451L-525L)

The **Electrolux ETM5207SC-R** is excellent for energy efficiency; its controls allow a good range of temperature combinations and the freezer can be set especially cold [-24°C]. But it's just OK for temperature fluctuations and uniformity and the freezer can get much too warm in winter unless the controls are adjusted.

See LG is Cool Again, opposite, for details on the **LG GC-L197STF**.

## HOW WE TEST

We've changed our test method and rating scale, so all past scores have been recalculated for this report. We no longer score ease of use; instead we list more features and details on what to look for to help you choose the right fridge.

**Temperature performance** Our tester, Corinna Horrigan, assesses **temperature fluctuations** – how far the temperatures swing as the compressor stops and starts – as even temperatures are an important factor in maintaining food quality. Corinna checks that there is an appropriate **range of temperatures** in the fresh food and freezer compartments at the same time – for example, can you set the freezer at the coldest setting for longer freezer storage while keeping the fresh food section at an optimum 3°C? She also checks **uniformity** of temperature throughout each compartment. She measures the effect on the fridge and freezer temperatures when the external temperature changes (**ambient change**), such as from summer to winter. And, because many readers tell us they have only changed their fridge controls once – to the **recommended setting** –

Corinna assesses the temperatures on this setting. If no recommendation is given, she assesses the factory or middle setting. A poor score for this means you should use a thermometer to get optimum temperatures, though we recommend you do this for any fridge.

**Energy efficiency** This is tested to the Australian Standard. Corinna also checks the energy label required by law to be displayed on new fridges.



## RELIABILITY

Fridges are generally a reliable product. Westinghouse and Fisher & Paykel consistently make our What to Buy lists and rank well in the reliability table. About a quarter of problems with these brands relate to door seals, temperature control or icing-up of food. If you own a Maytag or GE fridge, you're more likely to experience problems. In 2008/09, 31% of Maytag owners who had problems experienced them with water leakage and 24% with temperature control. Of problems experienced with GE fridges, 20% were associated with temperature control and 19% with controls/switches or thermostat.

It's good to see that our top-performing brands in tests, Westinghouse, Electrolux and Fisher & Paykel, are also the brands members say they're most likely to buy again.

**New fridges:** The survey finds 17% of problems are associated with controls/switches or thermostat and temperature control, and 15% with excessive noise.

| PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS * | (%) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mitsubishi (76)                                     | 94  |
| LG (884)                                            | 90  |
| Kelvinator/Electrolux (685)                         | 89  |
| Fisher & Paykel (3622)                              | 88  |
| Westinghouse (2893)                                 | 88  |
| Samsung (597)                                       | 83  |
| Whirlpool (448)                                     | 83  |
| Maytag (224)                                        | 72  |
| GE (124)                                            | 68  |
| All refrigerators (9553)                            | 87  |

\* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

| PRODUCT                                     |         |                 | PERFORMANCE       |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  | FEATURES |                |       |
|---------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------------|-------|
| Brand / model (in rank order within groups) | Freezer | Number of doors | Overall score (%) | Temperature performance score (%) | Fluctuation score (%) | Range score (%) | Uniformity score (%) | Ambient change score (%) | Recommended setting score (%) | Energy efficiency score (%) | Claimed / measured energy use (kWh / year) | Noise level (dB) | Chiller  | Crisper drawer | Dairy |
| <b>LESS THAN 300L</b>                       |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| # Westinghouse WTB2300WB-XAU                | Top     | 2               | 67                | 63                                | 80                    | 70              | 60                   | 29                       | 80                            | 81                          | 411/403                                    | 39               | ✓        | 1              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E249T                       | Top     | 2               | 48                | 39                                | 15                    | 65              | 65                   | 54                       | 90                            | 84                          | 387/374                                    | 34               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| <b>SMALL (300L-380L)</b>                    |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| Fisher & Paykel E381T                       | Top     | 2               | 79                | 77                                | 60                    | 80              | 85                   | 90                       | 80                            | 85                          | 433/424                                    | 35               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Westinghouse WBM3700WB                      | Bottom  | 2               | 76                | 74                                | 65                    | 90              | 75                   | 67                       | 70                            | 82                          | 495/481                                    | 38               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E372B                       | Bottom  | 2               | 74                | 72                                | 50                    | 85              | 70                   | 85                       | 85                            | 82                          | 498/482                                    | 35               |          | 2              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E331T (A)                   | Top     | 2               | 72                | 68                                | 45                    | 85              | 85                   | 80                       | 80                            | 86                          | 407/388                                    | 36               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| <b>MEDIUM (381L-450L)</b>                   |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| # Fisher & Paykel E442B                     | Bottom  | 2               | 78                | 78                                | 60                    | 90              | 85                   | 81                       | 85                            | 79                          | 563/573                                    | 30               |          | 2              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E406B                       | Bottom  | 2               | 76                | 76                                | 65                    | 90              | 60                   | 90                       | 80                            | 78                          | 564/559                                    | 30               |          | 2              | ✓     |
| # Fisher & Paykel E440T                     | Top     | 2               | 74                | 72                                | 50                    | 85              | 80                   | 77                       | 85                            | 83                          | 488/494                                    | 30               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E402B                       | Bottom  | 2               | 73                | 72                                | 60                    | 85              | 65                   | 80                       | 80                            | 78                          | 528/561                                    | 35               |          | 2              | ✓     |
| Samsung SR394NW                             | Top     | 2               | 73                | 70                                | 65                    | 75              | 80                   | 60                       | 80                            | 85                          | 472/439                                    | 37               | ✓        | 1              |       |
| Electrolux ETM4407SC                        | Top     | 2               | 72                | 68                                | 75                    | 90              | 65                   | 33                       | 70                            | 90                          | 369/353                                    | 37               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Kelvinator KTM4400WB                        | Top     | 2               | 72                | 69                                | 65                    | 90              | 70                   | 45                       | 80                            | 84                          | 486/464                                    | 41               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Westinghouse WBM4300WB                      | Bottom  | 2               | 72                | 70                                | 75                    | 85              | 55                   | 66                       | 50                            | 81                          | 530/529                                    | 37               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Kelvinator KBM4300WB                        | Bottom  | 2               | 71                | 69                                | 80                    | 65              | 85                   | 53                       | 30                            | 78                          | 565/580                                    | 39               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| # Kelvinator KTM3900WB-R*7                  | Top     | 2               | 70                | 67                                | 50                    | 90              | 80                   | 50                       | 75                            | 82                          | 463/477                                    | 34               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Fisher & Paykel E411T                       | Top     | 2               | 67                | 63                                | 40                    | 85              | 90                   | 72                       | 50                            | 83                          | 454/478                                    | 35               |          | 1              | ✓     |
| Whirlpool WRID41TW                          | Top     | 2               | 64                | 58                                | 55                    | 80              | 65                   | 25                       | 60                            | 86                          | 430/424                                    | 43               | (E)      | 1              |       |
| Mitsubishi MR-420U-W-B                      | Top     | 2               | 59                | 53                                | 40                    | 78              | 60                   | 68                       | 20                            | 83                          | 495/486                                    | 37               | ✓        | 1              |       |
| Daewoo FR-4501W                             | Top     | 2               | 58                | 53                                | 45                    | 83              | 60                   | 39                       | 70                            | 79                          | 495/550                                    | 39               | ✓        | 1              |       |
| <b>LARGE (451L-525L)</b>                    |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| Fisher & Paykel E521T                       | Top     | 2               | 78                | 76                                | 60                    | 85              | 85                   | 77                       | 80                            | 85                          | 508/496                                    | 35               |          | 1              |       |
| Westinghouse WBM5100WB                      | Bottom  | 2               | 76                | 74                                | 75                    | 85              | 70                   | 65                       | 55                            | 84                          | 560/526                                    | 39               |          | 2              |       |
| Electrolux EBM5100SC                        | Bottom  | 2               | 74                | 70                                | 70                    | 80              | 65                   | 62                       | 80                            | 89                          | 428/401                                    | 34               |          | 2              |       |
| Kelvinator KBM5100MB                        | Bottom  | 2               | 74                | 72                                | 80                    | 70              | 80                   | 57                       | 60                            | 81                          | 589/593                                    | 38               |          | 2              |       |
| LG GN-R466FT                                | Top     | 2               | 74                | 72                                | 70                    | 60              | 75                   | 84                       | 85                            | 83                          | 490/506                                    | 37               |          | 1              |       |
| Fisher & Paykel E522BRXFDU                  | Bottom  | 2               | 72                | 70                                | 55                    | 85              | 70                   | 77                       | 50                            | 79                          | 636/627                                    | 34               |          | 2              |       |
| Fisher & Paykel E522B                       | Bottom  | 2               | 71                | 69                                | 60                    | 80              | 50                   | 87                       | 80                            | 78                          | 596/642                                    | 37               |          | 2              |       |
| # Electrolux ETM5207SC-R (B)                | Top     | 2               | 65                | 59                                | 55                    | 85              | 55                   | 30                       | 75                            | 90                          | 402/377                                    | 33               | ✓        | 2              |       |
| <b>GREATER THAN 525L &amp; FRENCH DOOR</b>  |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| Fisher & Paykel RF610A                      | Bottom  | 3               | 78                | 78                                | 70                    | 80              | 80                   | 83                       | 85                            | 79                          | 695/688                                    | 37               |          | 2              |       |
| <b>SIDE-BY-SIDES</b>                        |         |                 |                   |                                   |                       |                 |                      |                          |                               |                             |                                            |                  |          |                |       |
| Westinghouse WSE6100WA                      | Left    | 2               | 77                | 76                                | 75                    | 80              | 60                   | 90                       | 75                            | 79                          | 687/705                                    | 41               |          | 2              |       |
| Bosch KAN56V10AU (C)                        | Left    | 2               | 75                | 73                                | 60                    | 80              | 80                   | 75                       | 85                            | 82                          | 630/636                                    | 37               |          | 2              |       |
| # LG GC-L197STF                             | Left    | 2               | 75                | 74                                | 70                    | 80              | 70                   | 76                       | 70                            | 81                          | 638/645                                    | 33               |          | 2              |       |
| Daewoo FRS-U20ICW                           | Left    | 2               | 74                | 72                                | 60                    | 80              | 75                   | 74                       | 90                            | 81                          | 650/665                                    | 38               | (E)      | 2              |       |
| Bosch KAN58A40AU (D)                        | Left    | 2               | 72                | 71                                | 70                    | 70              | 70                   | 70                       | 90                            | 74                          | 750/758                                    | 38               |          | 1              |       |
| Smeg SR650XA                                | Left    | 2               | 66                | 63                                | 70                    | 40              | 80                   | 64                       | 60                            | 77                          | 760/726                                    | 38               |          | 1              |       |



| SPECIFICATIONS          |         |                              |                     |                            |                          |                                |                             |                           | COSTS                      |            |
|-------------------------|---------|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------|
| shelves/shelf positions | Rollers | All shelves removable at 90° | Door hinge position | Dimensions (cm, H x W x D) | Claimed total volume (L) | Claimed volume, fresh food (L) | Claimed volume, freezer (L) | Contact                   | 10-year running costs (\$) | Price (\$) |
|                         |         |                              | Rev                 | 139 x 54 x 62              | 230                      | 161                            | 65                          | westinghouse.com.au       | 806                        | 689        |
|                         |         |                              | Rev                 | 161 x 53 x 58              | 248                      | 191                            | 57                          | fp.com.au                 | 748                        | 819        |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | Rev                 | 161 x 64 x 70              | 380                      | 283                            | 97                          | fp.com.au                 | 848                        | 1149       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 162 x 66 x 71              | 365                      | 243                            | 122                         | westinghouse.com.au       | 962                        | 1269       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R or L              | 160 x 64 x 70              | 373                      | 250                            | 123                         | fp.com.au                 | 964                        | 1399       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | Rev                 | 143 x 64 x 69              | 329                      | 232                            | 97                          | fp.com.au                 | 776                        | 1029       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R only              | 169 x 68 x 73              | 442                      | 307                            | 135                         | fp.com.au                 | 1146                       | 1589       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 160 x 68 x 70              | 404                      | 271                            | 133                         | fp.com.au                 | 1118                       | 1649       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 170 x 68 x 73              | 447                      | 342                            | 105                         | fp.com.au                 | 988                        | 1299       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 171 x 64 x 70              | 403                      | 280                            | 123                         | fp.com.au                 | 1122                       | 1649       |
|                         |         |                              | Rev                 | 177 x 68 x 67              | 395                      | 272                            | 123                         | samsung.com.au            | 878                        | 999        |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 172 x 71 x 71              | 442                      | 339                            | 103                         | electrolux.com.au         | 706                        | 2589       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 172 x 71 x 71              | 431                      | 300                            | 131                         | electrolux.com.au         | 928                        | 1219       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 173 x 72 x 71              | 431                      | 300                            | 131                         | westinghouse.com.au       | 1058                       | 1529       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R or L              | 173 x 71 x 71              | 442                      | 339                            | 103                         | electrolux.com.au         | 1160                       | 1319       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 172 x 71 x 64              | 390                      | 302                            | 91                          | kelvinator.com.au         | 954                        | 1009       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 170 x 64 x 70              | 411                      | 314                            | 97                          | fp.com.au                 | 956                        | 1379       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R                   | 166 x 71 x 72              | 410                      | 302                            | 108                         | whirlpool.com.au          | 848                        | 999        |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 170 x 69 x 70              | 420                      | 290                            | 130                         | mitsubishielectric.com.au | 972                        | 1289       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R                   | 177 x 71 x 69              | 405                      | 280                            | 125                         | daewooelectronics.com.au  | 1100                       | 799        |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 170 x 80 x 71              | 517                      | 400                            | 117                         | fp.com.au                 | 992                        | 2339       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 173 x 81 x 71              | 504                      | 348                            | 156                         | electrolux.com.au         | 1052                       | 1899       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R or L              | 173 x 81 x 71              | 510                      | 349                            | 156                         | electrolux.com.au         | 802                        | 2379       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R or L              | 173 x 81 x 71              | 505                      | 349                            | 156                         | electrolux.com.au         | 1186                       | 1799       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R                   | 179 x 76 x 67              | 466                      | 324                            | 142                         | lge.com.au                | 1012                       | 1936       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R                   | 171 x 79 x 69              | 519                      | 360                            | 159                         | fp.com.au                 | 1254                       | 2829       |
|                         | ✓       | ✓                            | R or L              | 170 x 80 x 71              | 519                      | 360                            | 159                         | fp.com.au                 | 1284                       | 2059       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | R or L              | 173 x 81 x 76              | 520                      | 396                            | 121                         | electrolux.com.au         | 754                        | 2799       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 178 x 91 x 69              | 614                      | 433                            | 181                         | fp.com.au                 | 1376                       | 3599       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 176 x 90 x 71              | 606                      | 357                            | 249                         | westinghouse.com.au       | 1410                       | 1899       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 180 x 91 x 68              | 618                      | 377                            | 241                         | boschappliances.com.au    | 1272                       | 2049       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 176 x 89 x 74              | 567                      | 353                            | 214                         | lge.com.au                | 1050                       | 2199       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 180 x 91 x 68              | 618                      | 377                            | 241                         | daewooelectronics.com.au  | 1330                       | 1499       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 180 x 91 x 69              | 603                      | 377                            | 226                         | boschappliances.com.au    | 1516                       | 2999       |
|                         | ✓       |                              | na                  | 179 x 91 x 69              | 603                      | 377                            | 226                         | omegasmeq.com.au          | 1452                       | 2790       |

## USING THE TABLE

**Scores** The overall score is made up of:

- Temperature performance: 80%
- Energy efficiency: 20%

**Temperature performance** This score is made up of:

- Fluctuations: 30%;
- Range: 25%;
- Uniformity: 20%;
- Ambient change: 20%;
- Recommended setting: 5%.

**Energy efficiency** Is based on the fridge's energy consumption, taking into account its size.

**Features** see What to Look For, page 70.

**Noise level** These are comparative measurements, taken 1m up and 1m away from the fridge during normal running. Fridges can sound noticeably louder as the compressor starts and stops and may make unusual noises during automatic defrosting.

**Claimed volumes** This is how much air space the fridge has to cool; less space is available for storage. Use the volumes to get an idea of how big the freezer is compared with the fresh-food compartment.

**10-year running costs** are calculated at a rate of 20c per kWh. A 10-year period gives a useful indication of the long-term differences between high and low energy use – and you should be able to expect your fridge to last at least this long.

**Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2010. Many fridges are available in other styles and finishes, at a different price. Some can also be built into cabinets with a door kit that matches your kitchen cupboards.

## TABLE NOTES

# Newly tested model

na Not applicable – doors are side-by-side.

Rev Reversible door.

(A) New crispier and/or freezer bins have been added since our test, which may slightly affect its scores.

(B) The **Electrolux ETM5200SC (\$2269)** is technically similar and expected to perform the same.

(C) The **Bosch KAN56V40AU (\$2249)** is technically similar and expected to perform the same.

(D) The **Bosch KAN58A70AU (\$3499)** is technically similar and expected to perform the same.

(E) This chiller was too warm in our tests for optimal storage of highly perishable foods.



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CHOICE, the people's watchdog, promises to put the consumer voice centre stage in the banking reform debate.

We want a more competitive banking system that works for Australian consumers, including:

- Easy switching between financial institutions to get a better deal
- An end to unfair fees and charges
- Transparent and easily comparable information about financial products
- An end to conflicts of interest in the selling of financial products
- The government to take action to promote real competition in banking

For more information and to sign up to the campaign, visit [www.choice.com.au/betterbanking](http://www.choice.com.au/betterbanking)

We'll keep you up to date with regular emails about campaign activities and forums, where you can make your voice count.

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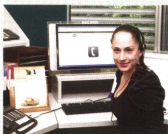
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## How to use this index

A full index, with links to articles from 2002 onwards can be found at [www.choiceextra.com.au](http://www.choiceextra.com.au) (see instructions, below right). **Bold type** indicates a product test, member survey or user trial report. Unbolded type indicates a CHOICE research report. \* Indicates an update, addition or correction.

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| Depression                                 | Oct           | depression                                 | Oct           | <b>Packaging, excess</b>         | Jul           | <b>Vacuum cleaners</b>         | Feb, Jun, Oct |
| Digital                                    |               | doctor/patient relationships               | Feb           | Palm oil                         | Aug           | bag/bin                        | Nov           |
| cameras, compact                           | Mar, Dec/Jan  | doctor/patient relationships               | Feb           | Pathology, gap payments          | Sep           | Vaccinations, pets             | Sep           |
| cameras, high-end                          | Aug           | gastric banding                            | Mar           | Pets, all-in-one & net-tops      | Sep           | <b>Washing machines</b>        | Mar, Aug, Nov |
| photo frames                               | Apr           | headache medication                        | Sep           | Pets, vaccinations               | Jun           | Weight control                 | Jul           |
| radios                                     | Apr           | heart care                                 | May           | Pharmacies                       | Sep           | Will kits                      | Apr           |
|                                            |               | organ donation                             | Jun           | Phones                           | Jun           | Wines                          | Nov           |

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## HARD WORD

The winner of this month's best entry goes to A. McKim, who isn't fooled by fine print. Thanks also to L. Salmon, M. Pogson, J. Kirk, F. Behl, J. Pedersen, W. Tuck and L. Wheeler for their contributions to this month's Hard Word. If you have examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

### THEY MUST BE NUTS!

With only one percent walnuts, calling this a "fruit and nut loaf" could be considered a stretch. However, given that one walnut weighs about four grams – or one percent of the weight of the loaf – the singular "nut" could actually be what's literally meant.



### AS AUSSIE AS, UMM, THE HAKKA ...

We're perplexed: how can something be Australian but also be imported?



### AH. MYSTERY SOLVED

This Australian butter is from New Zealand – perhaps like the Australian imported kiwifruit?



### PRIMA FACIE LOAD OF NONSENSE?

If you can make any sense of these "discounted" prices, you're doing better than us.



### Coles Group Card™ is making managing your account easier.

We're reducing some fees – and getting rid of others altogether.

| We've removed fees    | Was    | Now |
|-----------------------|--------|-----|
| Bank fee              | \$0.50 | \$0 |
| Voucher retrieval fee | \$7    | \$0 |
| Debitcard payment fee | \$20   | \$0 |
| Travel fee            | \$30   | \$0 |

### We've reduced fees from August 1<sup>st</sup>

We've reduced our late fee from \$35 to \$25. This fee applies if you don't pay the due amount in full by the date it's due. And we've reduced our overdraft fee from \$35 to \$5. This fee applies if the amount you owe is more than your credit limit.

### And there are fee free withdrawals

In March 2009 the owners of ATM began ATM Direct. We've provided a network of Westpac ATMs with no owner fees on withdrawals. So you can withdraw cash from any Westpac ATM – for free.

It's all designed to help you keep control of your finances. If you have any questions about these changes, or if there is anything else you would like to discuss please contact us on 1300 365 625.



details: A fee of 3% of withdrawal amount or \$3.00, whichever is greater applies, each time you use any ATM (including Westpac ATMs). Registered to BPAW Pty Ltd ABN 69 079 137 518

### NO SUCH THING AS A FEE-FREE WITHDRAWAL

It's hard to see how "you can withdraw cash from Westpac ATMs – for free" when you have to pay "3% or \$3 per transaction each time you use an ATM (including Westpac ATMs)". Where's the "free" bit?

### FROM COW TO COUCH

Perhaps it's not inconceivable that a leather lounge should be considered a "beast buy".

### MULTICULTURAL MEAT

A uniquely Australian South African sausage from the British Sausage Co?

